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MAJOR DANGERFIELD BURR U.S.A.
BY

"CAN SHE BE REALLY ROBBING THE DEAD, GENERAL CUSTER?" "I DO NOT UNDERSTAND IT, CODY!"

Buffalo Bill's Big Four;

OR,

CUSTER'S SHADOW.

A Romance of the Great Cavalry-man's Wyoming Campaign.

BY MAJOR DANGERFIELD BURR,

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CHAPTER I.

A MYSTERIOUS MEETING.

"Come one step nearer and I drive this knife to my heart!"

Sharp and determined the words rung out in the crisp morning air—the speaker a young girl, and the one addressed a ruffian, who stood but a few paces from her.

The scene was on the far frontier. But other ears than those she meant should hear heard her exclamation.

She stood on a narrow trail winding around a mountain-side, along the border of a precipice, while below her, fifteen feet away, stood the man who had drawn from her the terrible threat.

Her words checked the man, but only for an instant, for he advanced a step nearer.

Then she stepped to the very edge of the precipice and calmly looked down from the dizzy height, three hundred feet below.

"Hold! or I spring into eternity!"

Again the man paused, for her face showed her determination to do what she said.

And neither knew that other ears heard her words.

Ten feet above their heads was a mountain-spur, jutting forth from the cliff, rising above it like the prow of some huge vessel.

Upon it, as motionless as a bronze statue, were a horse and rider.

A few moments before the girl and her pursuer had appeared upon the mountain trail below, he had ridden fearlessly to the very edge of the spur, and sat upon his horse, drinking in with admiring gaze the sublime landscape spread out before him, of mountain, valley, river and plain, all in a state of nature's solitude, unbroken by the habitation of man.

Need I describe that horseman, a man whose glorious career as a soldier ended upon the ensanguined ground where was fought the battle of the Big Horn—where

"Custer brave still held the field,
Environs by his foes?"

It was the gallant cavalry chieftain, with his long blonde hair, eagle eyes, and daring spirit, who sat there, horse and man as motionless as the mountain spur, and gazed down upon the scene below them.

The young girl saw him not, and her pursuer suspected not his presence.

So lost was he in contemplation of the scene of grandeur that he had not heard the quickly-flying feet of pursued and pursuer, nor the quick-drawn breath, like a hard-hunted deer, until the maiden had bounded around the spur and stopped directly below him.

Instinctively, as one who lived with his life in his hand, he had drawn his revolver at sight of the form that sped around the spur, and when she halted, and the ruffian approached, the muzzle of the weapon covered the pursuer.

He heard the girl's threat to drive the knife to her heart; but he waited the movement of the man.

Then he saw her step to the edge of the precipice and look down, and he heard her words to "spring into eternity."

At this her pursuer stood spell-bound an instant.

The bold threat momentarily cowed him.

Then he seemed to doubt her words, for again he made a step forward.

"Stand back, or I take the leap!"

The man again paused, yet uttered no word, though he fingered the revolver he held, nervously.

The one on the spur above was no man to shoot another from an ambush; he spoke, and his words fell like a thunderclap from a cloudless sky, upon the ears of those two.

"Let him take the leap!" came from the lips of General Custer.

A startled cry from the girl, a pistol-shot, then another, followed by a death-shriek; and the man took the leap, for the bullet of General Custer had pierced his heart.

So sudden had been her rescue, so unexpected, there, in that wilderness, that the young girl very nearly lost her nerve, and was for a moment in danger of toppling over the cliff, but she rallied and sprung away from the chasm-

edge, covering her ears with her hands, to shut out the wild cry of despair that had burst from the lips of the man, and the dull thud that must follow as his body struck the rocks far below.

A moment she stood thus, and then she seemed to gain command of herself and looked up.

There, on the spur, stood the man who had saved her from death by taking the life of her pursuer.

But the soldier was on foot now, and over the spur hung the head of the noble horse, a tiny stream of blood trickling from a bullet wound in his head.

The bullet of the desperado, meant for the master's heart, had pierced the brain of the splendid animal, who had sunk in his tracks, and, in his fall, had very nearly hurled his rider over the dizzy height.

Nimbly alighting on his feet, General Custer had stood gazing sadly down upon his dead horse, for he had loved him well.

The movement of the young girl below caused him to glance down upon her, and he caught her upturned eyes, saw her raise her hands to him, almost in adoration, and heard her fervent words:

"Oh, sir! I thank you with my whole heart."

"Who are you?"

His earnest eyes were fixed upon her, as though to read her very soul, as he asked the question.

He saw before him one whom he had little dreamed of seeing there in that wilderness—a white girl of eighteen, with indigo-blue eyes, red-gold hair, and a face bronzed almost to the hue of an Indian.

Her form was the perfection of grace and symmetry, and her costume was one of barbaric splendor, for her moccasins, leggings, skirt and jacket were worked with colored porcupine-quills, embroidered with beads and trimmed with the plumage of gorgeous birds.

Her arms, bare above the elbows, were encircled by bands of gold and silver; massive strings of beads were about her neck, and her head-dress was of feathers.

An empty quiver hung at her back, and in her belt was the knife she had threatened to drive to her heart.

"A white captive of the red-skins, so I am fortunate in being able to rescue her," decided General Custer.

Then, as she made no response to his query, he repeated:

"Who are you?"

To his surprise the answer came:

"I cannot tell you."

"Do you not know, poor child?"

"Yes."

"Then why not tell me?"

"I cannot. You saved me from death, and I thank you, and I would know who you are."

"My name is George Custer."

"Are you General George Custer?"

"I am."

"The bitter foe of the red-skins?"

"I am the foe of those whose acts of cruelty, such as holding you, a white girl, their captive, force me to be merciless," was the decided rejoinder.

The girl regarded him for an instant, as though trying to stamp his face in her memory, then she said:

"The red-skins are your foe, and you are in danger here."

"I know that. I went on a scout with Buffalo Bill and we became separated, so I was returning to the fort when I stopped here to admire the sublime view and then you appeared."

"Who was the man who pursued you?"

"One of the band of Clint Carl, chief of the Gold Ghouls of the Overland."

"What is that red-handed desperado to you?"

"I cannot tell you."

"You mean that you will not?"

"Yes, General Custer."

"You are a strange creature."

She made no reply for a moment and then said:

"Your horse is dead?"

"Yes, his head caught the bullet intended for me."

"You should have shot the man without giving him warning, for the Gold Ghouls are quick with deadly weapons."

"I would shoot no man without warning; it is too much like assassination."

"You are as good at heart as you are brave. But we must part now. Do you know the trail to the fort?"

"Back over this ridge and down into the valley on the other side?"

"Yes; but carry your saddle and bridle, for in the valley you will find a horse, right where the trail crosses the brook."

"Good-by, General Custer."

He called to her, but she was gone, and to follow her from where he stood was quite impossible.

CHAPTER II.

THE MAID OF THE MOUNTAIN.

A HORSEMAN was riding along a valley which wound around the base of a lofty mountain, the side of which was precipitous.

Far above his head towered a cliff, near the

summit of which wound a mountain trail, not visible to his eye.

Through the valley wound a stream, the waters as pure as crystal; beyond towered a range of lofty mountains. Timber islands dotted the large valley here and there; a fringe of trees bordered the banks of the stream. The scene was wild, picturesque and gloomy in its solitude, for the horse and rider, as they rode slowly along, were the only living creatures that caught the eye.

The man thus alone in the vast solitude of the valley needs no description from my pen, when I say that it was Buffalo Bill, whose fame has spread the wide world over, and whose daring, handsome face has been seen in reality, or in picture, by nearly every one in the United States.

Like a centaur he sat his horse, his dark eyes keenly watchful of the scene about him—the watchfulness of instinct, for, though he saw no danger, yet he knew that his life was in deadly peril.

Suddenly, as from the clouds, came two sharp reports, and a shriek.

Instantly he drew rein and looked about him.

Then there came a rushing sound, as though from the wings of a thousand birds, and glancing upward, bold as he was, and used to scenes of deadly peril, a cry escaped his lips.

At the same moment his horse squatted low, as if from an unseen terror, and then was reined sharply back by his rider.

And just in time!

Down a few feet in front of Buffalo Bill there fell a human form, as though from the clouds.

An exclamation of horror broke from the scout's lips at the fearful sight, while his horse stood snorting and trembling with fright.

"Be still, Rocket!" cried the rider, and he sprang from his saddle and approached the mass of shattered humanity before him.

It was that of a man, bearded and repulsive-looking, the flesh still quivering, but stone dead.

Upward glanced the scout.

His eyes fell upon a cliff far above, from whence he knew the man must have fallen.

The shots told of a tragedy, and the wild shriek had come from the lips now silenced forever.

Sharply he scanned the cliff, but no human form was visible upon the crest.

No eye glanced down to see where the form had fallen.

To reach the cliff from where Buffalo Bill stood, was a ride of several miles around to the upper trail; so he could but stand there and wonder.

"He wears the brand of the Gold Ghouls, in those gold-mounted weapons, so his life is well ended.

"But he is a human being, and I will not let him lie here to become food for the wolves," and staking his horse out to feed, he took from his saddle a small hatchet, sought out a suitable spot, and began to dig a grave in the soft earth, close under the shelter of the cliff.

The man had, at his back, a *serape*; in his belt was a gold-mounted revolver and bowie-knife, and he had so fallen that neither was injured.

When the grave was dug, the body was wrapped in the *serape*, the belt of arms were taken off, and the unfortunate man was consigned to his last resting-place.

A moment the scout stood, regarding the grave; then he remounted and rode on up the valley, still keeping in close under the precipitous mountain-side.

The valley narrowed as he advanced, and soon terminated in a canyon, the sides of which towered far above, and over them tumbled the stream which wound down the vale.

Turning a bend in the valley, the scout suddenly halted, and his hand was upon his revolver in an instant.

Face to face Buffalo Bill had come upon one who seemed also startled, and whose hand had drawn a weapon.

But the scout withdrew his grasp from his revolver and raised his hat with courtly grace, while he said in his pleasant way:

"Why, lady, what are you doing here alone in these wilds, for, in spite of your Indian costume, you are no red-skin."

The one he addressed was the same whom General Custer, a couple of hours before, had rescued from death; but she now was mounted upon a fine snow-white pony, the saddle and bridle of which were also of Indian make.

"I am not in the danger here in these wilds, sir, that you are, so I advise you to at once leave this, to you, deadly land, Buffalo Bill," was the reply.

"You know me, and yet I have never seen you before, I am quite certain," said the scout in deep surprise.

"There is but one man on this whole border who can answer your description, and that man is Buffalo Bill," the mysterious girl responded. "Are you the man?"

"So men call me; but who, may I ask, miss, are you?"

"I cannot tell you, sir. But, I must go on

my way now. I again warn you not to remain in this deadly land of the Sioux. Go to the end of this canyon, and where the mountain trail crosses the brook, in the valley beyond, you will find your friend."

"What friend?" asked the surprised scout.

"General Custer."

"Ha! you have seen him?"

"Yes, two hours ago, and he will be at the brook by the time you reach there, if you go at once."

"But do you mean that I shall leave you alone here?"

"Yes."

"A white girl?"

"Yes."

"This land is full of red-skins."

"I know it well."

"Again I ask you who you are and why you are here?"

"I cannot tell you."

"You are a captive among the Sioux?"

"No."

"Then what are you?"

"I cannot tell," came that same answer so often repeated.

"You must go with me, miss, for I will not leave you here."

The hand of the girl quickly dropped upon her revolver at the words of Buffalo Bill, and her eyes flashed, while she said sharply:

"I prefer to remain, sir, so don't attempt to drive me."

"As you please, miss; but I spoke for your good."

"I know best what is for my good; but hasten, or you will miss General Custer."

"One moment, please?"

"Well?"

"What were those shots fired upon the mountain, awhile ago?"

"Ask General Custer, sir. Now, good-by, Buffalo Bill, and be warned to keep out of the land of the Sioux!"

She spoke to her horse, and the animal bounded forward, shooting by the scout like an arrow.

Cody was in a quandary. Who and what was the strange girl who preferred to remain in that wild land to going with him?

He could not solve the mystery, and he was half-tempted to take her trail; but remembering that she had said General Custer was not far away, he must seek for him.

The daring general had come with Bill on a scout into the land of the Sioux to endeavor to discover the villages of the red-skins and their force.

They had parted to pass up different valleys; the scout had been chased by a band of red-skins and thus the two had become separated, and Buffalo Bill was most anxious for the safety of his general; therefore he hastened on at a gallop toward the spot indicated by the mysterious maid of the mountains.

He had gone but half a mile when he discovered a horseman approaching through some timber ahead, for the canyon had now widened out into a valley beyond the mountains.

Instantly the scout prepared to greet a friend or foe.

CHAPTER III.

THE MYSTERY DEEPENS.

INDISTINCTLY seen through the timber the scout had beheld a horseman, and so had prepared to meet an enemy if so he should prove.

Other than a foe he had no expectation of seeing there, unless it was to meet General Custer; but the horse now visible was a white animal, and the general had been mounted upon a dark bay steed.

But as the horseman came nearer the scout saw his uniform and said:

"It is the general; but he has changed horses!"

Springing forward he took off his broad sombrero and waved it.

"Bravo, General Custer! I am glad to meet you again, for I have been most anxious about you," cried Buffalo Bill.

"I've been most anxious about myself, Cody," answered the general, with a light laugh, while he grasped the hand of the scout and added:

"And about you, too, Bill, for I saw you were in hard luck with a score of Indians after you. How did you escape them?"

"Oh, I put Rocket to a leap they did not care to risk on their ponies, and it gave me a long start, and in the darkness that soon came on they could not follow my trail. But you have changed horses, general."

"Yes; and good as was my other I have not lost by it, you see."

"No; that is a splendid animal; but where did you get him, general?"

"He was a present to me, Bill."

"Did a girl give him to you, sir?"

"Yes; and a beauty she is, too."

"Oh, I know her," declared Cody, indifferently.

"You know her?"

"Oh, yes, sir, and she's a daisy, for good looks, general."

"Who is she, Bill?" asked General Custer, with deep interest.

"I cannot tell," and the scout smiled.

"Her very words! but who is she, Bill?"

"In truth, general, I cannot tell you, for I only made her acquaintance half an hour ago, and—"

"You have seen her, then?"

"Yes, sir, I came upon her back in the canyon; but you have seen her, too?"

"I have, and I was following her trail when I saw you; but where did she go?"

"On through the canyon, sir, and I would have trailed her, but she told me where to find you, and I came in search of you."

"We will trail her together, Bill, for I must know more of this strange creature; but, let me tell you how I met her."

And General Custer related to the scout how he had been enjoying the grand beauty of the scene from the mountain spur, and had been startled by her dashing into sight, pursued by the desperado.

"That was the gentleman who came flying down from the clouds, almost upon my head! Rocket is still nervous about it. At first I thought he had dropped out of a balloon."

"I don't wonder, Bill, that you did. The maiden would tell me nothing of herself, but said, as she saw that the man had killed my horse, that I would find another where the mountain trail crossed the brook, and to take my saddle and bridle with me. I did so, and discovered this splendid animal tied to a tree."

"I saw that a trail of two horses led from the mountain to the brook, and one track only came in this direction. This told me that the girl had led this horse there for me, and had then ridden off, so I took her trail, and here I am."

Buffalo Bill listened attentively to this story of the general, and then he said:

"General, we are in the very heart of the Sioux country."

"Yes, I know that."

"I was glad of your company, and yet I was sorry to see you risk so much in coming here with me."

"Well, Cody, I'm here, so let us make the best of it."

"If I was alone, general, I would follow this girl's trail."

"Agreed! I go with you, for I wish to know who she is."

"Well, then, we will follow her trail together."

"And rescue her, for she is a captive of the Sioux, of course."

"She said not."

"She told you she was not a captive?"

"Yes, sir."

"Then what is she, Cody?"

"I can only reply in her words, sir—I cannot tell."

"Do you think any settler can have dared to settle here among the Sioux?"

"I have not heard of any being such a fool, sir; it would be certain death."

"Well, how else can her presence be accounted for?"

"I have heard of no such captive maiden among the Sioux, general."

"Nor I; but can it be that she is the daughter of a settler who fell in love with some chief and went to his people with him?"

"She does not have the look of a girl so foolish, sir."

"Then again I ask—who and what is she, Bill?"

"I have heard, general, of several renegade white men, who have fled to the Sioux for safety."

"Ah, yes, and she may be the daughter of one of these men, reared in an Indian camp?"

"Yes, sir, but then she was no common person. She is a lady in looks and words, in spite of her Indian costume."

"You are right, Bill; she was no ignorant girl, but talked well and looked the lady. We must solve the mystery by following her trail."

"And if we overtake her, sir, what then?"

"Ah! there's the rub, for she certainly does not wish to be rescued, and then what is it we are to rescue her from, Cody?"

"I don't know, sir."

"Well, we'll reason with her," and with a laugh General Custer urged his horse on, and Buffalo Bill turned back also upon the trail of the mysterious woman who had so strangely crossed their path there in the wilds of the Sioux country.

CHAPTER IV.

IN A TRAP.

THE trail of the horse ridden by the unknown girl, showed that she did not anticipate being followed, for she had not urged the animal out of a slow canter.

She had seemed to follow the trail of the scout, and when Buffalo Bill and General Custer at last came in sight of her, they were considerably startled to see her horse feeding close in under the shadow of the cliff, while she was bending over the grave of the desperado whose body the scout had buried.

"Why she is throwing the earth out of the grave, Bill," said General Custer.

"She is indeed, general; but let us draw back out of sight, dismount and watch her."

This they did, and to their amazement they beheld the mangled body drawn up out of the grave, the *serape* was taken from about it, and then the girl seemed to be searching in the pockets.

"By Jove! she is doing what I forgot to do," said the scout.

"You took his belt of arms?"

"Yes, sir, they are on my saddle, but one revolver was missing."

"He killed my horse with one, and it fell from his hand as I shot him, and he staggered back over the cliff."

"But the girl picked it up and carried it off with her."

"Can she be really robbing the dead, General Custer?"

"I do not understand it, Cody!"

"Nor I, sir; but see! She has taken a paper from his pocket, and is reading it."

"Yes, sir, and places it in her bosom."

"Suppose we advance now, sir."

"All right, Bill," and mounting their ponies, General Custer and Buffalo Bill rode quickly forward.

The girl heard their horses' hoof-falls, started, bounded to her pony, and springing upon his back, started away like the wind down the canyon.

"Shall we pursue, sir?"

"I don't half like it, Bill, for she seems determined to avoid us. I only wish we had crept upon her without her seeing us."

"It could not be done in this canyon, sir."

"True; but we must rebury that poor wretch."

"Yes, sir," and they rode forward once more and soon reached the despoiled grave.

The general shuddered, inured as he was to dread scenes, when his eyes fell upon the mangled form of the man he had shot, and Buffalo Bill dismounted and quickly unwrapped the body in the *serape*.

Then he threw the loose earth out of the grave and placed in it the limp form.

The general went to a few saplings near and cut them down with his knife, to place over the grave to prevent wolves from tearing up the body, and having done this service to a fellow-being, be he what he might have been, they again mounted to go on their way, for the shadows of night were coming on, and they had determined to give up following the trail of the young girl, while, Buffalo Bill having located the villages of the Sioux, they decided to return to the fort, many a mile away.

As they rode along, General Custer pointed to the neck of his horse and said:

"Do you see that, Bill?"

"Yes, sir, I noticed it before, and it is most cleverly done," and the eyes of the scout rested upon the white neck of the horse ridden by the general, where was visible a *Red Tomahawk*.

The hair was seemingly dyed crimson, and most cleverly executed, in the exact shape of a tomahawk.

"I thought it was painted there, Bill, at first, but it is not."

"No, general, the hair is stained, and it is Indian work, but the best I ever saw."

"Can you read the sign, Bill?"

"It is doubtless the horse of some chief, whose name is *Red Tomahawk*."

"I guess you are right; but then the girl gave me the horse."

"True, sir, and I remember now that her horse had the same mark, though I did not more than notice it at the time."

"Her name cannot be *Red Tomahawk*, Bill."

"Hardly, sir."

"So we don't know any more than we did before."

"No, sir, but hark!"

They both drew rein quickly, for to their ears came the neigh of a horse, and, to prevent their own animals from replying, in an instant the hands of the two riders grasped their animals' nostrils.

"General, I will go on ahead, on foot, and have a look out at the other end of the canyon, for that was the shrill neigh of an Indian pony."

So saying, Buffalo Bill gave General Custer his bridle-rein, and he moved ahead on foot.

He moved with the caution of an Indian, and soon obtained a position on the rocks where he could see the end of the canyon.

What he saw was by no means a cheerful sight, for half a hundred red-skins blocked the mouth of the canyon.

"Whew!" exclaimed the scout, and convinced that the canyon was not a place for the general and himself, he hastily returned to where the former awaited him.

"Well, Bill?"

"General, there are half a hundred Sioux waiting for us at that end of the canyon, so suppose we don't go that way," suggested Cody, in his light-hearted way, and which no peril could subdue.

"Agreed, Bill; I'd rather go the other way, anyhow," was the response in the same spirit.

"Well, Bill?"

"General, Sioux are cunning devils, and I think I had better take a look on foot before we ride out into the valley."

"It is a good idea, William!"

The scout dismounted and once more went on ahead.

In ten minutes he returned with the quiet remark:

"We are in a trap, general, for the rest of the tribe are at this end of the canyon."

CHAPTER V.

BRAVE MEN AT BAY.

It was certainly an announcement, made by the scout, calculated to appall the stoutest heart, that both ends of the canyon were blocked by Sioux warriors in large force.

But the face of General Custer never changed color, and that of the scout wore the same look of calm power natural to it.

Each knew that their scalps were worth more to the Sioux than those of a hundred soldiers, and they had been most cleverly led into a trap.

"We are in a trap, Bill, that is certain," said the general, with a smile.

"Yes, sir, and a woman was at the bottom of it," laughed the scout.

"Borderman as I claim to be, I see no way out of the scrape, Cody."

The general looked up to the canyon walls upon either side as he spoke.

The canyon was like the small part of an hour-glass, connecting the two valleys that spread out from it, and though but half a mile in length, there was no way of leaving it after having entered it at one end or the other, for the sides were precipitous walls, rising to the height of from sixty to two hundred feet.

"We haven't got wings, general, and we need them just now to get out of here," the scout said.

"We do, indeed."

"We can get in this little curve and stand the red-skins off if they attack us, for they mean to come on at night, sir."

"You think they know we are here, Bill?"

"Sure! they have had an eye on us from the mountains, saw us ride into the canyon and swooped down upon either side, and there they are, and here we are."

"So there is no hope?"

The question was asked without a quiver in the voice.

"As long as there's life there's hope, general, and I don't think you are a man to say die any more than I am. If they attack us, and we go under, we will leave squaw widows behind, and I intend to take along as much Injun company to the happy hunting-grounds as I can. But, how high do you call that tree yonder?" and Buffalo Bill pointed to a scraggy pine growing on the top of the cliff.

"About seventy feet."

"So I think, sir, and our lariats will make eighty, while our stake-ropes will run as much more."

"But how can you get them up to the tree?"

"I can only try to do so by throwing a rock, with one end of the lariat attached, and have it roll down the other side of the tree."

"If we can get the line around it, and both ends down here, we can climb up."

"Yes, but we'll have to desert our horses."

"True, general, but dearly as I love old Rocket, I like life better."

"They won't harm the horses, but if they catch us we will be slowly roasted alive."

"You are right, Bill; but it will be an accident if you can throw a rock so as to fall on the other side of that tree."

"It will be, sir, but I must try it, while you please keep an eye up and down the canyon."

They were in a crescent-shaped space in the canyon, where they had ample room and were concealed from any one coming up or down the narrow pass between the valleys.

Having selected a rock that was suitable, Buffalo Bill made it fast to the end of the lariat with strings cut from his neck-handkerchief. Then he stood back, and coiling the lariats and stake-ropes, all bound together, he swung the rock around and around and gave it a jerk into the air.

Eagerly he watched it, while the general, from his stand where he could see up and down the canyon, also gazed to note the result.

It struck the wall a few feet below the tree and fell back again.

Then it was thrown again, and again, but though the tremendous strength of the scout sent it even above and beyond the tree, it did not roll, as he had hoped, and fall upon the other side.

When his arm was tired out, General Custer took it and also tried, but with the same result, and darkness coming on they were forced to give it up, for the rock was liable to fall back upon their heads.

"It is no use, Bill."

"No, general; we are in for it, I guess."

"You can think of no plan?"

"Did you notice any niche, like this one we

are in, on either side of the canyon, up or down, between here and the ends?"

"I noticed only that it was a solid wall, with the exception of this break where we are."

"I was in hopes there was some place where we could hide in, and thus let the red-skins pass us by in the darkness, though we would, of course, have to leave our horses here."

"There is not a shelter a wolf could find."

"Then we must sit here and await the coming of the red-skins, and my plan is to open with a revolver in each hand, dash out upon them, and thus cut our way through—if we can."

"We can but try, Bill, and it will be death to remain, and no more to try and cut our way through, while the surprise will be in our favor."

"Well, sir, we will mount our horses and await the coming of the Sioux. When they get near we will charge together, and to the right, for that will carry us away from their villages."

"If either gets through, general, he can tell how the other died; but if neither of us escape, the boys will find out some day how General Custer and Buffalo Bill were snuffed out, and I guess they'll think we were not lonesome on the trail to the Spirit Land, for want of red-skin company," and the scout laughed recklessly.

Then the two brave men mounted their horses, drew a revolver in each hand, and sat waiting the dread ordeal.

A moment more and there came a sound in the canyon.

"Hark! They are coming, general, and now it is life or death to us!" said Buffalo Bill in a deep, low voice.

CHAPTER VI.

FROM THE CLOUDS.

THE sound that had caught the keen ear of Buffalo Bill as he and General Custer sat there on their horses awaiting the coming of the Sioux to attack them in the canyon was like the stamp of a foot.

He listened attentively, and in an instant another sound was heard. It was as though some one was striking the solid rock with a stone.

"General, that sound is behind us," Buffalo Bill announced.

"So I thought, Cody."

"I will take a look back yonder, for some red-skins may take a notion to surprise us that way."

"How can they?"

"By coming down as we hoped to go up—on a lariat."

"Ah, yes."

The two men had spoken in a whisper, and slipping off of his horse the scout crept back into the little ravine, which only ran some forty feet into the solid wall of the canyon and was about half as wide again.

As he moved along under the precipice he suddenly ran against something.

Instantly he halted and his hand clutched it.

"A lasso," he muttered.

Then he shrunk back and waited.

It seemed, as he thought and had said, that the red-skins were coming down upon them from the cliff.

He felt the end of the lariat and discovered a stone attached to it.

This had made the sound he had heard, and it told the one on the cliff that the lariat had touched the ground.

"One at a time only will come down, and I'll be ready to welcome him," decided the scout, as he shrunk back closer into the shadow.

Soon the lariat began to sway to and fro.

"He is coming," was the scout's decision.

The lariat swayed more violently and Buffalo Bill raised his revolver as he saw a form descending, and which, in the darkness, he supposed was a Sioux.

Hardly had he leveled the weapon when he happened to think that a shot might precipitate matters.

"Steel is safer now, and I will use it, and then, Mister Sioux, I'll borrow your lariat to climb up on," muttered Cody, as he replaced his revolver and drew his bowie-knife.

The form descending by the lariat was now but a few feet above the head of the scout, whose eyes were firmly fixed upon it.

A moment more and Buffalo Bill grasped the form—but it was not a Sioux brave. It was a woman!

"My God, girl! I nearly drove my knife to your heart," cried the scout as he almost staggered back in astonishment at the narrow escape he had made of murdering a woman.

"You deemed me a Sioux warrior, Buffalo Bill?" was the quiet reply of the girl.

"Yes, I certainly did."

"I am not, you see; but where is General Custer?"

"Yonder, you can see him in the edge of the ravine."

"I see him, so go and bid him come here."

"He is watching for the coming of the red-skins."

"They will not attack you for an hour yet, so do as I say."

The scout obeyed, and a moment after the

general approached the girl, and said with surprise:

"We meet again, miss, for Buffalo Bill told me who you were."

"Ah! who did he say that I am?" she asked quickly.

"He said that you were the same strange creature we had both met during the day."

"I understand now, sir, your words, but I supposed you meant that he knew me."

"No, and I only wish that I did; but you came down from the clouds, I believe?"

"Yes, from the cliff."

"And why?"

"To save you from death."

"Ah! how knew you of our danger?"

"It matters only that I know it, and have come to extricate you."

"You are most kind."

"You were foolish to follow my trail."

"So I've thought ever since we got caught in this trap; but where are the Sioux?"

"At either end of the canyon."

"And they mean to attack us?"

"Yes, after awhile, or rather to come here to attack you; but they will find you gone."

"I already owe you a favor, for I got the horse you left me."

"Yours was slain in my defense; but you must desert your horses again, for up this lariat is your only chance of escape."

"I will ascend first, and then you tie on your saddles and bridles and I will draw them up, after which you can come, and the scout will follow you."

"But why our saddles and bridles?"

"I have other horses awaiting you."

"Ah! but will you not get into trouble?"

"No."

"I will call the scout," and he walked away.

When General Custer returned with Buffalo Bill the girl had gone.

She was half-way up the lariat, and soon she disappeared over the edge of the cliff.

Then General Custer's saddle and equipments were tied on, and up they went.

A few moments passed; the rope descended and the scout's outfit was drawn up.

"Good-by, Rocket, old fellow, for I've got to leave you. Some day I hope to get you back, and the scalp of the Sioux who rides you," said Buffalo Bill.

Seizing the rope, the general now began to ascend.

"It was no easy climb, with his boots and arms; but he went up like a sailor, hand over hand, and soon disappeared in the darkness above.

Buffalo Bill then grasped the lariats, for there were three together, and made the ascent.

He found that the girl had made the other end fast to the tree he had tried to make use of, and she was standing upon the cliff with General Custer as he reached the top.

She at once began to draw up the lariats, and coiling them about her, said simply:

"Take up your traps and follow me."

They both obeyed in silence, and she led them back along the ridge for a distance of a mile, gliding like a shadow ahead of them.

Passing over the ridge, she began the descent and after a hard walk of it, they reached the valley, and held on their way until they came to the bank of a small pebbly stream.

In it, made fast to a lariat stretched across, between trees upon either bank, were three white horses.

They were so fastened that they stood in the water and could not reach the shore.

She unfastened the lariat stretched across, and then sprung into the stream, the water of which was up to her knees.

Crossing to the other bank, she unfastened the further rope-end and returned into the brook, from which, with a bound, she mounted the horse nearest to her.

"You will have to wade in and saddle your horses, for they must leave no track on the bank," she explained.

The general and the scout at once waded in, and two minutes after were mounted.

"The trail where I led you is rocky and will leave no sign. Now follow me."

So saying, the mysterious girl led the way down the stream, Buffalo Bill and General Custer following in silence.

For half a mile they rode, the water now and then growing very shallow, and again deep enough to cause their horses to swim a few strokes, but the pebbly bottom leaving no trail.

At last they came to a ford that was often used by the red-skins.

It was here that the other horse had been left by her for General Custer.

"Yonder lies your way, so take it, with the warning never to come into this Sioux country again."

"Good-by."

She was off like an arrow, riding in the direction of the Sioux villages, while General Custer and Buffalo Bill sat upon their horses, gazing after her in utter amazement.

She had saved them from death by torture, and then deserted them without a word as to why she had done so, or who or what she

"Well, Bill, what do you think of *that*?" asked the general, when she had disappeared from sight in the mountain shadows.

"I am half-inclined to believe she is a spirit," was the half-serious, half-joking response of the bewildered scout.

CHAPTER VII.

THE BORDER BELLE.

"GENERAL, we must give up trying to solve that mystery now, and head for the fort; but I will solve this riddle yet," decidedly spoke the scout.

"You promise me this, Bill, for that girl must not remain a captive among the red-skins, and after she has saved our lives, as she has, we owe it to our manhood to help her."

"If she needs help, general; but we must find out her secret at least, and I promise you I will do so. But, now for the fort."

So saying the scout led the way out of the stream, and following the trail leading eastward they pressed on at a rapid canter.

"These are good horses, Bill."

"They are, indeed, sir."

"The girl seems to have only white horses."

"Yes, and so ghosts are said to have only snow-white steeds," laughed the scout.

"By Jove, Bill, but I half-believe you think the girl is a spook."

"No, general, I don't believe in the supernatural; but she certainly is a mysterious being, and but for her we would now be dead, or prisoners."

"No, not prisoners, Bill, for when all hope is gone, rather than become a captive to die by the fiendish torture which the Sioux are adepts in, I would keep a bullet for my own heart."

"I do not fear death, as you know; but I fear such anguish as these red-skins can inflict," and General Custer spoke with an impressiveness which Buffalo Bill noticed at the time and remembered long after, when he had reason for so doing.

Until the gray dawn stole over the prairies, the general and the scout pressed on.

Then they halted in a clump of timber that fringed the banks of a prairie stream for rest and breakfast, for they had their provision haversacks with them.

As they drew rein in the timber, and the light of day brightened, Buffalo Bill pointed to the neck of his horse, and said:

"See there, general!"

"Ha! it is the brand of the Red Tomahawk!"

"Yes, sir, and your horse bears the same," and the scout motioned to the crimson mark of a red tomahawk upon the neck of the animal ridden by the general, and the counterpart of the brand upon his own horse.

The two animals which the mysterious "Maid of the Mountains," as General Custer called her, and "Maiden of Mystery," as Buffalo Bill named her, had given to the general and the scout, were certainly very fine specimens of horseflesh.

They were Indian ponies, rather larger than the average, and white as snow, excepting the Red Tomahawk which had been branded upon their necks in some mysterious manner.

They went along at an easy pace, showing no fatigue, and without other adventure the two friends, Custer and Cody, had arrived within a few miles of the first cabin of the settlements, when a distant shot reached their keen ears.

Dismounting, Buffalo Bill at once ran to the top of a ridge that hid the prairie beyond.

It might be a settler, or an officer from the fort, twenty miles away, hunting game; but then it might also be bloodthirsty red-skins on a raid.

Reaching the ridge and glancing over, Buffalo Bill at once returned at a brisk run to his horse.

"What is it, Cody?" asked the general.

"Indians, general, and they are chasing the Border Belles for all they are worth," was the quick reply.

"Settler Vassar's daughters, do you mean?"

"Yes, general."

"How many Indians?"

"About a dozen, from my quick count of them."

"And they are firing on them, for hark!"

Several shots were heard, and Buffalo Bill, who had been tightening his saddle-girth now mounted and said:

"We will head them off, sir."

"Certainly, Bill," and they dashed together over the ridge.

The scout was armed with a repeating-rifle, and also was General Custer, for he always carried a weapon of the kind when he was wont to go off on scouting expeditions, and he was a dead shot also.

As they spurred into sight over the ridge, they beheld an exciting scene half a mile away upon the prairie.

Their eyes first fell upon two persons, well mounted, and urging their horses to their full speed in flight along the prairie valley.

Behind them came a dozen mounted red-skins, driving their horses hard to overtake the fugitives, and occasionally firing, though seemingly

to frighten them into halting, rather than with the intention of harming them.

The fugitives were young girls, eighteen and nineteen respectively, and were known as the Border Belles.

They were sisters, and the only children of a well-to-do settler, Henry Vassar by name.

The maidens were known as Pearl and Ruby, the former a blonde, the latter a brunette. Both were really beautiful, and hard was it for their admirers to tell which was the more lovely of the twain, for admirers they had by the score, even in that wild land. Officers and men at the fort, and the young settlers were all anxious to win favor in the eyes of Pearl and Ruby Vassar.

An educated man, once wealthy, their father had sought a home upon the Kansas border, and until their twelfth and thirteenth year Pearl and Ruby had been reared in a life almost as wild as the Indians about them.

Mrs. Vassar died, and the settler had sold out his farm, sent his daughters to St. Louis to boarding-school, while he had gone to the gold-mines.

After two years of indifferent success he had again gone to farming, but further out on the border, in Wyoming, then most sparsely settled.

He had erected a spacious cabin, cleared or broken a hundred acres of land, gathered about him a quantity of stock and made himself comfortable, after which he had sent for his daughters to come and join him.

Their early life on the prairies had given them a zest for just such an existence, and they had gladly given up their boarding-school for the free life on the plains.

The wagon-train which brought them also brought Ruby's piano and Pearl's guitar, books, and odds and ends of various kinds to make their home comfortable, and it was not very long after their arrival before Sunset Ranch was a most delightful abiding-place.

A rustic piazza had been added to the front of the cabin, flowers bloomed in the yard, chickens, cows and sheep gave a home-like appearance, and within doors all was comfort and contentment.

Henry Vassar tilled his land and looked after his stock, and his daughters did the house-work, milked the cows, fed the chickens, cultivated the flowers and hunted, fished and rode over the prairies and mountains to their heart's delight.

These daughters it was that General Custer and Buffalo Bill now beheld flying for their lives before a dozen pursuing red-skins.

CHAPTER VIII.

A RUNNING FIGHT.

THE nature of the country where the Border Belles had been discovered was rolling prairie, valley, hill and timberland.

When seen by the scout the young women were some three hundred yards in front of the red-skins, and heading along the prairie-like valley that ran below the ridge on the other side of which Buffalo Bill and General Custer had been following the trail to the settlement, intending to halt for the night at the hospitable home of Henry Vassar, where they well knew they would receive a warm welcome and the best of fare, for both Ruby and Pearl were noted housekeepers.

Once over this ridge then the general and Buffalo Bill were in a position to dash down into the valley and head the two girls off, and could thus throw themselves between the pursued and their pursuers.

This they determined to do, and if their presence did not check the red-skins, they could follow on after Ruby and Pearl in a running fight.

As they dashed to the rescue the wild war-cry of Buffalo Bill, so well known to the Indians, burst from his lips, while General Custer waved his black sombrero around his head, and loud rung the word, as though in command to his cavalrymen:

"Charge!"

Both pursued and pursuers heard that ringing war-cry, that loud command, and the latter half drew rein, while the former swerved from their course as though to meet those who so daringly came to their rescue.

Down the slope dashed the gallant Custer and the daring scout, their repeating-rifles ready for use in their hands.

With but an instant of hesitation, the red-skins came on, while they burst forth in defiant war-cries, as though determined not to lose their game.

The Border Belles were known to ride always the fleetest horses, and yet the red-skins had been steadily gaining upon them, and, but for the appearance of the general and the scout, would have overtaken them within the next mile or two.

"What is best, Bill?" asked General Custer, as they rode toward the Indians.

"You wheel alongside of the Belles, general, and ride on with them, while I drop back to try my rifle on those fellows."

"You are always looking out for my safety, Cody; but this is not a case of General Custer,

but as man to man, so we'll let the girls ride on alone, while we fight their battle for them."

Bill made no reply, and a moment after the maidens dashed up.

Their faces were flushed with excitement now, not fear, for they knew that no two braver defenders could they find upon the border, as General Custer and Buffalo Bill were both known to them.

Their hair had fallen down and hung in masses to the very backs of their ponies. In their hands they each carried a repeating-rifle, though they had emptied them of their bullets when the pursuit first began, and had no more cartridges with them.

Still each had a revolver, which they had kept for use at the last moment of hope.

"Don't halt, ladies; continue your flight!" cried Custer.

"And you?" asked Ruby.

"Will drop back and try and keep those devils at bay."

"Well, we will drop back with you, for we are not going to desert those who take the chances you have to come to our aid—eh, sis?" said Ruby.

"No, indeed! But who'll lend me some cartridges for my rifle?"

"And me?"

"Here are some, if they will fit your guns," the general answered.

While this conversation was going on the four had kept on at a run, General Custer and Buffalo Bill having wheeled alongside of the maidens without checking the speed of their horses.

Instead, also, of checking their pursuit, the red-skins came on, if possible, at greater speed, and bullets began to patter fast about those in advance.

Having ridden a short distance in flight, while General Custer and the Border Belles dashed on, Buffalo Bill suddenly reined his horse up, threw his repeating-rifle to his shoulder and fired rapidly upon their pursuers.

"Bravo, Bill!" cried Custer, while the sisters cheered, as, looking back, they saw a man fall from his horse and a couple of ponies go down.

"I wish it had been the other way," said the scout, as he rode on again.

"Two Indians and one pony, you mean?"

"Yes, general, only they are not red-skins."

"What?"

"Those are not Indians, General Custer."

"Are you sure, Cody?"

"Yes, sir; for they are mounted on American horses, not one riding an Indian pony, while they do not give the war-cries red-skins would, nor ride like them."

"You think they are white men disguised as Indians?"

"I am sure of it, sir."

"Well, Cody, you are generally correct, and may be now; so I will empty my rifle, and, I hope, do as well as you did."

As he spoke, General Custer reined up his horse and opened fire.

"We are tie, general," cried Buffalo Bill.

"No; for see, my man has not fallen from his saddle, though wounded; but they still hold on in chase."

"Yes, sir; but I'll stop them for a moment!"

And Buffalo Bill halted, sprung to the ground, and throwing his rifle to his shoulder took deliberate aim.

The pursuers seemed to know the man and what was coming, for they dropped low on their horses and swerved wildly from their direct course, as though to destroy that deadly aim.

But with the crack of the rifle a man dropped from his horse; a second shot caused another to reel in his saddle; a third wounded a horse, and a fourth brought an animal down, pinioning his rider's leg beneath him.

"That ends the chase, Bill," cried Custer, as the scout again mounted and the party dashed on, for neither the gallant officer nor the maidens had continued their flight while Buffalo Bill had halted to fire.

"With two of their number dead, and as many wounded, they are a determined lot, general, if they continue the chase, for they must see that our rifles have the greater range."

"Yes, but they have had enough, for see, they are turning back."

This was true, and the four fugitives at once drew their tired horses down to a walk.

"General, when we reach yonder timber, you can go on with the young ladies. I shall go back on the trail, as I am anxious to find out who are the scoundrels."

"You don't want me to accompany you, Cody?"

"No, general, for I have not drawn an easy breath since you left the fort with me. I have a right to risk Buffalo Bill's life, but not General Custer's, sir."

The general laughed as he answered:

"All right, Bill; but a general should know what his scouts and soldiers have to go through."

"Yes, sir, and you know it about as well as any man in the army, from personal experience."

"But those fellows seem in a big hurry to get off now, and they are carrying their dead with them, wishing to hide the fact that they are not

red-skins, and also, having recognized you, they will of course expect pursuit from the fort."

A few moments more and the timber was reached, and here Buffalo Bill bade farewell to General Custer and the Border Belles, who rode on toward the settlement, leaving the scout to follow on the trail of those who he had declared to be white men in the disguise of Indians.

CHAPTER IX.

THE FORGED LETTER.

WITH hearts full to overflowing with joy at their escape, and thanks to their brave defenders, the Border Belles rode on with General Custer, though they felt anxious, as he did, that Buffalo Bill should have gone back to discover just who and what the pursuers were.

The general was anxious to reach the fort, for he had already been gone longer than he had intended, and knew that nothing short of a command not to go would deter the scout from following the trail of those who he had declared were not Indians, but white men in the guise of such.

As Buffalo Bill's scouting expeditions were almost always alone, the commander felt that Cody was well capable of taking care of himself, though he felt that he was risking much to pursue a gang of desperadoes who had been but partially defeated in their attempted capture of the maidens. Having recognized the scout, as they unquestionably did, the outlaws would suspect him of doing just what he had done, and thus lay in ambush for him.

As this thought came to Custer he suddenly drew rein and said aloud:

"I was wrong to allow Cody to go."

"Do you think they will suspect his following them and ambush him?" asked Ruby.

"You read my very fears, Miss Ruby."

"Can we not ride after him and recall him, sir?" Pearl asked, anxiously.

"Are you afraid to go on alone, young ladies?"

"No, general, but you must do as Buffalo Bill said—return to the fort, for your life is too precious to risk it as you are doing, so we will go together and overtake the scout," Ruby said.

"Well, I cannot refuse such pleasant company, especially as I cannot get rid of you," laughed the general, and the three started back at a gallop.

But a brisk ride back to the spot where they parted with Buffalo Bill failed to discover just which way he had gone, though the general and the Border Belles were all good trailers; so they were forced to give it up and once more start homeward, the general seeming really anxious about the scout.

At last he asked:

"Pray tell me, Miss Pearl, how it was those red-skins, if such they are, caught you so far from home?"

"Father left yesterday, to go over to a stock-ranch where he had bought some cattle, and did not expect to return until to-night, and this morning early an Indian boy came to the house with a note from father, asking us to come to the Spring Valley and help him drive the cattle home."

"But you could not have gone to the Spring Valley, for you are off the trail."

"No, we were on our way when Ruby's quick eyes saw some one in the timber ahead, and we rode around to avoid them, and out dashed those red-skins."

"So you at once took to flight?"

"Yes, indeed we did, general, and, as they had us headed off, we could only run down the valley," Ruby explained.

"I can hardly believe, with Cody, that they are not red-skins, though he has an eye that is not easily deceived."

"They seemed very determined to capture us, and though they fired at us, did not appear anxious to hit us."

"One of them rode a horse that I have heard described as an animal such as the chief of the Gold Ghouls rides."

"Ah! I recall the animal you refer to—spotted, jet-black and snow-white, and the one who rode him acted as the leader," Custer remarked.

"Yes, sir, and those who have been so unfortunate as to meet the Gold Ghouls say that their chief rode just such a horse," added Ruby.

"So I have heard, and it goes to help out Cody's idea that they were white men in disguise, for those outlaws are up to all kinds of deviltry, and their chief has doubtless seen you, fallen in love with you both, and, unable to decide which one he wished for his bride, determined to kidnap you both," Custer remarked in a bantering tone, while Pearl said slyly:

"They say he is very handsome."

"They do not know, Miss Pearl, for he always wears a mask, I have heard."

The sun was just setting when at last the party rode up to the door of the Sunset Ranch, and the first one to greet them was the father.

"Why, where have you been, you truants?" he demanded. "I was going to scold you, as I found no warm dinner awaiting me, but, as you have such pleasant company I'll forgive you; so dismount, general, and come in, sir," said Henry Vassar, cordially.

"Where have you been, father, that you have gotten home so soon, and, but for General Custer, your daughters would not be here now," Pearl said.

"And Buffalo Bill, too, for he and the general saved us from being kidnapped," Ruby announced.

Vassar turned pale and anxiously asked:

"Do you mean it? Were you in danger?"

In a few words Pearl told of their narrow escape.

"But, what were you doing so far from home?"

"Going to meet you, father, as your note ordered."

"My note?"

"Why, father, you look bewildered."

"I am, Ruby, for I sent you no note."

The maidens looked at each other in surprise, and then at General Custer, who said:

"The young ladies told me, Mr. Vassar, that they had gotten a note from you, brought by an Indian boy, which told them to come to Spring Valley and help you drive home some cattle you had purchased."

"I bought half a dozen head of cattle, it is true, but I drove them home without trouble, and more, I sent no such note."

"What does it mean?"

Ruby ran into the house and at once returned with the note.

"Is this not your writing, father?"

"It is not, though it closely resembles my writing. There is some underhand work in this."

General Custer took the note, which was written on the leaf of a note-book, and in pencil. He read it aloud as follows:

"MY DEAR PEARL:—I wish you and Ruby to mount your cattle ponies, and come at once to the Spring Valley, to help me drive home the cattle I have bought, for they are too wild for me to handle them alone. I will wait for you by the Willow Spring, so come by the Valley Trail. Don't forget to ride your ponies that have been stock-drivers, for you will need them."

"Your father,

"HENRY VASSAR."

"And you say this letter is a forgery, Mr. Vassar?"

"It is, General Custer, for I reached home soon after noon with my cattle, coming by the ridge trail, and had no trouble."

"What can it mean?" queried Pearl, anxiously.

"It means that a trap was set for us, and by some one who knows well father's writing; yes, and about our home, too, for he wanted us to ride the cattle-driving ponies, which are not near so fleet as our horses."

"I tell you, Buffalo Bill was right, General Custer; those men were not red-skins!" and Ruby's face flushed with indignation.

"You are right, Miss Ruby; Buffalo Bill read them well, and, as he is on their trail, we will know just who your intended kidnappers are," the general responded, while Pearl said, in a low tone:

"Yes, if they do not kill the brave scout."

CHAPTER X.

THE LONE TRAIL.

REARED upon the plains from his early boyhood, there was little in prairie and mountain craft that Buffalo Bill did not know, I may say does not know, as he still lives, and, in spite of his delineation of wild Western life in the East, he has not forgotten his border training nor has his hand lost its cunning, his heart its courage.

He had learned to read signs as the red-men read them, and he could trail a bird, his comrades were wont to say of him.

He knew the peculiarities of each tribe, and could tell a Comanche from an Apache, a Sioux from a Pawnee, a Cheyenne from a Winnebago as readily as an Irish could be distinguished from a Dutch comedian.

A glance at the country and with the instinct that the Indian and the brute creation have, he could tell where there was water to be found or a good camping-ground, and thus he read all other signs that others, less skilled, could not see.

In the pursuers of the two sisters his experienced eye had noted that there was a difference in the riding and actions of the horsemen from what Indians would be, and thus he felt certain that they were white men masquerading in the guise of red-skins.

With this belief in his mind, he was anxious to discover just who it was that were playing so bold a part.

As chief of scouts at the fort, it was his duty to solve border mysteries, and here was one that he felt should be looked closely into.

There were other foes upon that wild border than red skins, for there was a band of outlaws known as Gold Ghouls, who haunted the Overland trails, robbing Pony Express riders, stage-coaches, and now and then a Government wagon-train.

Waging war upon their own race, as it were, these outlaws, it was said, were allies of the Sioux, and had their haunts in the fastnesses of the mountains, where there were not enough

soldiers to follow them, as it would take a large force to invade the Indian country.

With the desire to discover just who these painted-face masqueraders were, Buffalo Bill started upon his lone trail.

But he was too cautious to follow them, expecting just what General Custer had dreaded, an ambuscade; so he watched them from a hiding-place, saw which way they went, and, knowing the country thoroughly, as he did, he divined the trail they would take.

So he made a flank movement of several miles, urged his horse to a good speed, and, getting ahead of the trail which he expected them to come, quietly decided to ambush them.

His knowledge of the ground told him about where they would camp for the night, and so hiding his horse in a secure retreat, and stripping him of his saddle and bridle, he staked him out to feed and rest, while he went on foot to a point which he knew that the horsemen must pass near.

It was a clump of timber, an acre in size, upon the top of a knoll, and with scores of boulders scattered about in it.

The trail led directly through the timber; so the scout sought a secure hiding-place among the rocks, not twenty yards from where the party must pass.

He presumed that some of the gang would speak, as they rode by, and he could know whether it was Indian or English, while he could see them distinctly enough to decide what they were, even if they passed by in silence.

Cutting a thick bush, he placed it so as to conceal his head above the rocks, and yet permit him to see distinctly, and then he patiently waited.

It was nearly sunset, and he was beginning to feel anxious, fearing that, after all, they might have taken some other trail, when he saw a horseman ride over a rise in the prairie, a mile away.

"There they come, for I recognize that black and white horse I saw to-day. I wonder if it can be Clint Carl and his Gold Ghouls?" muttered Buffalo Bill, as he brought his rifle around for use, and loosened his revolvers in his belt—not that he meant to be desperate enough to attack single-handed a number of men, but he wished to be prepared, if by chance he should be discovered.

Behind the spotted horse came others, and soon six horsemen were in sight, while four men were on foot, evidently taking turns with their comrades in riding, as their ponies had been killed by the fire of Custer and the scout.

One of the horses carried a load, which the keen eye of Buffalo Bill soon saw were dead bodies.

"They would not bury their dead, as a grave would reveal who they are. A cunning man leads that band," thought Cody.

Along the trail they came, and, just as the sun sunk behind the horizon they rode into the timber, and, as the leader came within easy pistol-range of Buffalo Bill he called out:

"We will camp here for the night, men, for there is a spring yonder in that pile of rocks."

CHAPTER XI.

LIKE AN APPARITION.

It required very little urging on the part of Henry Vassar, to get General Custer to remain all night at Sunset Ranch, for it was not the first time the officer had enjoyed the hospitalities of the home, and he was very tired with his long and hard ride of the past few days.

He had already intended stopping over there, with Buffalo Bill; but after the pursuit of the Border Belles, and the scout's having gone off on the back trail, he had decided to go on to the fort and send out a scouting party in chase of the band.

The forged note to the maidens decided Custer to have a talk with the settler, with a view to discovering from whence it had come; so he remained at Sunset Ranch, and until quite a late hour they canvassed the affair.

"Have you refused any of your numerous lovers of late, young ladies?" asked the general, seeming to think that there would be a clew.

"I haven't had a chance," Pearl assured, laughing.

"I'm too afraid of being an old maid to refuse an offer," Ruby replied innocently.

"I must, however, disagree with you, and again ask my question," the general persisted.

"You don't think we would have such horrible fellows for lovers, as men who would kidnap us for refusing to marry them, general?"

"Yes, Miss Ruby, you might have just such lovers. This is an unsettled country, where, naturally, some rather desperate characters congregate. Who your neighbors are, or those you meet, you do not know, and appear they ever so honest, they may be members of the Gold Ghouls for all you can find out," and the general spoke earnestly.

"General Custer who are the Gold Ghouls?" asked Pearl.

"That is just what I am anxious to find out, Miss Pearl. I simply know them as a band of outlaws, I think in league with the Sioux, who haunt the Overland trails, robbing stage-coaches, stealing horses, running off stock, and

now and then pillaging a settler's home. Their chief is said to be one Clint Carl. More I cannot tell you; but I believe I will set Cody to work as a ferret upon their track, for if any man can run them down he can."

"He can, indeed, sir, and I believe he has a watch upon them as well as upon the Sioux," remarked Henry Vassar.

"I would not be surprised if he found those whose trail he is now on, to see some of the Gold Ghoul Gang, and I advise you young ladies not to take such long rides away from home as you have been doing, for at any moment we may expect a Sioux raid, not to speak of Clint Carl and his outlaws prowling about."

"But you have not answered my question about your discarded beaux, for if I knew that any one had received a refusal at the hands of either of you young ladies, I might be able to find a basis for this forged letter."

Pearl glanced at Ruby and Ruby at her sister; then both laughed.

Just then the watch-dogs began to bark, and going to the door the settler saw a horseman dismounting at the hitching-post, and seemingly unmindful of the snarling brutes about him.

Calling off the dogs, the settler recognized his visitor as a young man who had settled down the valley ten miles away, some six months before, and who had quite a large cattle-ranch.

"Ah, Mr. Golden, I am glad to see you. Get out, you brutes!" and with a kick at the dogs Mr. Vassar greeted his visitor and led him into the sitting-room.

He was a handsome young fellow, scarcely over twenty-eight, with a bronzed, frank face, full of character and daring.

He was well-dressed, particularly so for the border, as he wore a black velvet jacket, a silk shirt, gray corduroy pants and handsome cavalry boots, ornamented with spurs.

His sombrero was embroidered in the Mexican style and encircled by a gold cord, a miniature lariat.

In his black silk scarf glittered a diamond, and a ruby ring encircled the small finger of his left hand.

His weapons were of the finest make, and altogether he looked the darling gentleman plainsman.

He doffed his hat as he entered the room, bowed low to the two sisters, and greeted with dignified courtesy General Custer, whom he had met before.

"It is rather late to make a call, Mr. Vassar, but I have been up the country to buy some cattle, and I noticed signs of Indians over in the valley, so thought I would stop by, and warn the young ladies not to venture too far from home."

"Have your scouts reported Indian signs about, general?"

His voice was very pleasant, and his manner most winning.

"I have been away from the fort for some days, Mr. Golden; but I have seen Indian signs myself, and so have the young ladies, as they can tell you," the general responded.

"Yes, far more signs than we cared for, have we seen," Ruby said, and she told of the chase of the afternoon.

"Now, this is too bad, general; that you and Buffalo Bill, both married men, should be the heroes and rescue Miss Pearl and Miss Ruby. Why, there are a score of young settlers in this part of the country who would give our right arms to have been in your place; but I have heard it said that you and Cody were born for luck."

"I hope so," laughed the general, and soon after Gabriel Golden took his leave, declining to remain all night as the settler urged him to do.

"That is one of the finest young fellows in the settlement, and I would like to know which one of you young ladies he is in love with," said General Custer.

"Both of us, he says, and I believe him, for he's sweet on me when Pearl is not around, and I know he is the same with her when I'm not about, though she won't admit it; but he's handsome, is he not, General Custer?"

"Very, and though the men at the fort first thought him a dandy and a tenderfoot, they soon changed their minds, for he has the pluck of a panther, is a dead shot, superb horseman, and when he has stayed over night at our camp has generally gone off with all the pocket-money the officers had to put up against him."

"I like him very much, general; but I wish I knew more about him, and, somehow, I think I have seen him before, though he says we never met until he came to the settlement," Vassar remarked.

"I wish he was in the army, for he'd make a splendid officer," Custer added, and then as it was late the party retired for the night.

At an early hour, after a most tempting breakfast, the dashing cavalry chief mounted his horse and rode away on the trail toward the fort.

He had not gone very far when he beheld a horse and rider in the trail before him.

One glance was sufficient to show Custer that it was the mysterious "maiden of the mountains," appearing like an apparition before him, and that she was waiting for him was evident.

CHAPTER XII.

THE FATAL RESEMBLANCE.

HARDLY had General Custer's eyes fallen upon the mysterious maiden barring his way, when there came the clatter of hoofs behind him.

Instantly he wheeled to the rightabout, and his hand dropped upon his revolver, for he knew not whether to expect friend or foe.

Rapidly the hoof-beats fell, and there dashed into sight a horseman.

"It is Scout Gaston," said the general, and removing his hand from his revolver he turned toward the girl once more. She had been a hundred yards away, in the trail before him; but now, she was not to be seen; she had disappeared!

The horseman dashed up, and saluting his general drew rein, for he was an army scout from the fort.

He was strangely like General Custer, in face and form, and, flattered at the resemblance, he had allowed his blonde hair to grow long, wore a sombrero, an army blouse, and affected the bearing of his commander.

He was a brave scout withal, and was kept on duty as a courier between the line of forts on the frontier.

"Ah, general, you here and alone, and redskins about?" he said with a reproachful manner, which his love for his general allowed to go unnoticed.

"Yes, Gaston, I have been on a scout with Buffalo Bill, and am returning to the fort, while he has gone off on another trail; but where have you seen red-skins?"

"I was chased by them, sir, last night and up to dawn."

"You do seem to have ridden hard; but where are you just from?"

"The Platte, sir, with dispatches."

"Well, give them to me, Gaston, and I will follow at a slow pace while you ride on."

"You don't wish me as an escort, sir?"

"Oh, no, thank you, and you had better push on and get rest, for you may have to take the saddle again, and I wish to see some one on my way to the fort."

The courier saluted, and having handed over his dispatches darted away and disappeared in the timber.

Custer did not care to have him see the maiden, as the scout might misunderstand her presence there, and, having seen her in his trail, he cared not to ride on without discovering her motive in being there.

He admitted to feeling a deep interest in the strange girl, and as she had saved his life in the mountains, and at the same time refused to make known who she was, and he now beheld her in the settlements, he was most anxious to learn all that he could of her movements.

So while Gaston rode on, General Custer remained where he left him, and he glanced over the dispatches given him by the scout.

The clatter of the hoofs of the rapidly-going horse died away, and the dispatches had been read, with an occasional glance over the paper to see whether the girl would reappear.

Suddenly a hoof-fall was heard in the trail behind the general, and turning quickly he beheld the maiden.

She was mounted upon a snow-white horse, and the animal seemed to have been ridden hard.

Upon his neck the general noticed the brand of the Red Tomahawk, and now that he gazed fixedly upon the girl, in the broad glare of the sunlight, he saw that the same brand, a small Red Tomahawk, was upon her forehead, evidently painted there with a skillful hand.

Her attire was the same as when he had before seen her, and except that she was mounted she was certainly the same strange being whom he had saved from the desperado.

She sat her horse with the ease of a perfect horsewoman, and riding up close to the general came to a halt.

"We meet again, miss, and most unexpectedly to me, I assure you," and General Custer raised his sombrero.

She bowed with courtly grace, and replied:

"We meet again, sir, yes, and I am here to warn you that danger lies in your path."

"Danger lies in the path of every soldier, miss," was the reply of the general, and he smiled in a way that showed his heart was one to feel no fear.

"But death, sure and merciless, lies before you, General Custer, if you follow the trail you are now on," declared the strange girl.

"Ah! and my faithful scout, Gaston, has just taken it," and General Custer seemed as though about to press on after the courier.

"Hold, General Custer! for I utter no idle words, and I know what awaits you on that trail," and the girl's voice fairly rung with earnestness.

"And my scout?"

"We will speak of him afterward. Thunder Cloud had you hemmed in, in the canyon, you and Buffalo Bill, and he was frenzied with rage at your escape, but attributed it to no aid from others, thinking you had managed to catch a line on the tree by throwing it up there."

"He had his warriors search for your trail,

and the tracks of the two horses were found coming toward the settlement, so he knew that they could only be Buffalo Bill and you who had gone that way, but where you got your horses he could not tell.

"He discovered that you and the scout had parted company, and sending a force on Buffalo Bill's trail, he came on after you."

"He knew where you passed last night, and that you would come this way to the fort this morning, alone, and he lies in wait for you at Red Brook crossing now, and with him are thirty braves."

"By Heaven, girl! then Gaston will be slain."

"I know it!"

"Why in Heaven's name did you not tell me sooner?"

"I meant to warn you, and stood in your path when the scout appeared and I hid, for I did not wish to be seen by him. Better the soldier than the general, and, as he looks strangely like you he will be taken for you and killed, and Thunder Cloud will return to his people rejoicing in the belief that he has your scalp."

"My God, girl! is there no way to save poor Gaston?" and the general looked as though he meant to ride forward alone to his rescue.

"No, he is at the Red Brook by this time—hark!"

As the girl spoke there came to their ears a volley of rifle-shots, followed by a wild yell of triumph.

"Poor Gaston! He has died for me," said General Custer with deep emotion.

"No, he would have been shot anyhow, for his trail lay that way; but his resemblance to you will cause the Sioux to believe they have killed you, and there will be a general uprising on the border."

"The trail is safe now, General Custer, for Thunder Cloud and his braves will not wait there a moment after that shot; so go on your way; but be warned that there will be deadly work along this border after this."

She wheeled her horse as she spoke and dashed away, leaving General Custer seated upon his horse in a by no means enviable mood.

CHAPTER XIII.

THE SHOT AT THE RED BROOK.

IT was with a very sad heart that General Custer rode on his way to the fort, where were his headquarters.

A man holding high rank, and one who had won honor in the war, he was yet a natural borderman, and sympathized with those whose lives had been passed upon the prairies and in the mountains of the wild West.

He was the friend, as well as the commander of his officers, soldiers and scouts, and he loved the life of peril he led, and was fond of an adventure that would be a close shave with death.

The Courier Scout, Gaston, he had liked much, and he was sorry that he had met a fate that was intended for him, and yet he could but congratulate himself that he had escaped.

Gaston would have been killed, following the trail he was riding, had he not met him; but he wondered that the maiden, whoever she was, had not spoken so as to save the courier.

Could she have wished the scout to die and give the impression to Thunder Cloud and his warriors that they had killed him, the "Yellow Haired Chief," as the Indians called General Custer.

So musing, and wondering more and more who the strange girl was that knew so thoroughly the country, and so well the plans of the Sioux, and yet must live in the mountains where he had first met her, the general rode on his way.

But as he neared the Red Brook he was on the alert.

His rifle lay across his saddle ready for use, his eyes searched every bush and rock, and he rode on like a man prepared to fight or fly, as the case might be. The trail led down into a vale, crossing there the Red Brook, and boulders and underbrush were upon all sides. It was the very place for an ambush the general well knew, and a row of graves on the banks of the stream showed that it had been taken advantage of for that purpose often before.

The spot was dreaded by scouts and soldiers alike, and stories were often told around the camp-fires that the Red Brook Valley was haunted, while several old hunters and trappers who thoroughly believed in the supernatural, had asserted that they had seen ghostly forms there.

With the heavy timber overhead, the undergrowth, and the hills, the place of crossing was almost like twilight, even at noonday, and a shadow seemed to fall upon the heart of General Custer as he rode into the gloomy little vale, for he expected to find there the mutilated form of Gaston the courier.

But he reached the brook and drew rein, for no body yet met his gaze. There were signs there which his practiced eye read well, and he saw that there had been a struggle of some kind just where he stood.

Looking about him, he noted where red-skins had crouched behind convenient rocks and trees,

and then the tracks of a number of horses, unshod, led down the banks of the brook toward the prairie.

But nowhere was the dead body of Gaston visible.

Crossing the stream to where the row of graves was, he was startled to see a form suddenly appear before him; but though he quickly dropped his hand upon his revolver, for he had slung his rifle again at his back, he was too late, as he was already "covered" with a rifle.

"Hands up, General Custer, for you are my game!" cried the man, sternly, and the muzzle of his rifle was covering the heart of the officer.

General Custer was a cool man in danger, and though daring to recklessness, was not one to throw his life away.

He saw before him a man who showed that he feared to have his face seen, as he wore over it a cloth mask. He was dressed in a buckskin suit, boots and slouched hat, and looked the desperado, as his bold act showed him to be.

At the threatening command General Custer calmly folded his arms, and said sternly:

"I will raise my hands in appeal, sir, only to my God. What do you wish of me?"

"Do you refuse to put up your hands, General Custer?" asked the man.

"I do."

"Well, sir, before I kill you, I wish you to know that I have kept my threat to do so. I am Burton Segus, whom you sentenced to be shot for desertion—now you shall die, and—"

The words were not finished, for there came a sharp crack of a rifle from up on the hillside, and the man fell in his tracks, his finger upon the trigger, causing his rifle to explode, and sending the bullet dangerously near the general's head.

When the man was speaking, General Custer, with his arms folded, had his right hand on the pistol-butt of his revolver, and he meant to draw and risk the shot of the desperado.

He knew the man to have deserted from the fort, and to have carried off a number of horses with him, while he stood on guard one night.

Tried for his crime, he was sentenced to be shot, but had escaped by digging through a rotten log of the lock-up, and he had left a note stating that he would one day avenge himself by killing General Custer.

That he meant to keep his word there was no doubt, and the chances were strongly in favor of his doing so, when there came the rifle-shot from the hill and dropped him in his tracks.

With amazement he sprung forward to where the desperado lay, a bullet-wound in his head, and seeing that he had nothing to fear from him, he turned his gaze up on the hillside to discover who it was who had saved his life, for he felt that his chance of killing the deserter, under the circumstances, was one in a hundred.

A horse was flying quickly away through the timber, and upon his back was a rider.

"That girl again! Why, she seems my very shadow. I must know who she is!" and General Custer spurred on in pursuit.

But he had gone only a few bounds when he drew rein, and said aloud:

"It is unmanly to chase her. I must find out in some other way who she is."

Riding back to the form of the deserter, he halted and gazed down upon it, while he murmured:

"Well, Burton Segus, you met the death you intended for me; but I will not be revengeful now, so will send some soldiers from the fort to bury you."

So saying he rode on his way along the trail, wondering at all that had occurred, and unable to understand what had become of Gaston, for he had no doubt but that the Sioux had killed him.

"They must have carried his body with them, though it is strange if they have done so—Ah! there comes Doctor Frank, as I live, and alone!"

Before him, a quarter of a mile, he beheld a horseman, who was well mounted, and appeared to be a man of large size.

His hair fell in waving masses below his shoulders, and a mustache, but no beard, adorned his face—a manly face, full of character, handsome and fearless. His uniform and shoulder-straps showed that he was a soldier and an officer.

He was armed with revolvers and bowie, and to his saddle-horn hung a repeating-rifle.

With his splendid physique, black slouch hat encircled by a gold cord, his well-fitting uniform and cavalry boots, he looked the daring border cavalier that he was, for, though surgeon at the fort, Doctor Frank Powell was noted as a scout, and had received from soldiers, plainsmen and Indians half a dozen sobriquets.

He had discovered General Custer at the same time that he had been seen, and a few minutes after the two met and warmly grasped hands, for the surgeon scout admired his general greatly and the regard was mutual.

CHAPTER XIV.

THE SURGEON SCOUT.

"WELL, general, I am glad to see you safe, sir, for I took the trail to find you and Bill," said Doctor Frank in his low, pleasant voice, as he grasped Custer's hand.

"It's just like you, Powell, to look me up, and I thank you, and will say that it is only blind luck that I am still alive."

"You have been in great danger then, as I feared, sir; but, where is Buffalo Bill?"

"I guess he's all right, for if any man can take care of himself Buffalo Bill is that man, and you are much like him in that respect, Powell," and the general smiled.

"Thank you, sir; but I shall have to see if we cannot get Congress to pass a law that none of our generals shall play the part of scouts, as you do, sir."

"Oh, I like it, and wish to see for myself sometimes. That is why I went with Cody, and I'll tell you, Powell, of my trip, though I wish it to go no further."

"Certainly not, sir."

"There are some things that I will make known, but there is one thing that I wish to solve in my own way, and that is who my *Shadow* is."

"Your *Shadow*, general?"

"Yes, for I have one, and one, it seems, that can take better care of me than I can of myself," and General Custer told of his and Buffalo Bill's going into the Sioux country, their becoming separated and all that happened, adding:

"Now I did not tell Settler Vassar and his pretty daughters about this mystery of the mountains, for I wish to keep the secret until it can be proven who she is."

"She saved Bill and myself when we were caught in the canyon like rats in a trap, and she saved me from Thunder Cloud and his warriors awhile ago, and again from that deserter, Segus."

"Now, what is she, and who is she, Surgeon Powell?"

"It is more than I can answer, sir."

"Have you heard of such a person before?"

"No, sir."

"Not among the settlements, or in the Indian villages?"

"No, general, I have not, and I am sure if she was a captive of the red-skins she would never be allowed to go free as she does."

"Why, she has in reality shadowed you, as you say."

"She has, indeed, and, what is strange, she has a Red Tomahawk painted upon her forehead, from brow to brow, and you see this one branded in crimson on the horse that she gave me?"

"I see it, sir."

"Bill's horse bears the same brand, and so does the animal she rides."

"They are all white horses, too, and splendid animals, and I am bewildered at the mystery that hangs about her."

"I cannot account for it, sir; but what about the man she killed in the Red Brook Valley?"

"Ah, yes, I will send men from the fort to bury him, simply saying that he attacked me and met his fate."

"And you could find no trace of Courier Gaston, sir?"

"None."

"Well, general, I will go on as I intended, and see if I can find Bill; and in the mean time will try and discover some trace of Gaston."

"I will be glad to have you do so, surgeon, and kindly leave a good trail which can be followed rapidly, for I will send your two brothers, Night Hawk George and Broncho Bill, after you. I will start out early to-morrow morning with a hundred men, for I feel sure that Cody will discover work for us to do, unless he is captured, and then he will need our aid."

"This is a good plan, general, and you can tell my brothers that I will leave a well marked trail, and ask them to do the same for you."

"I will go to the Red Brook Valley, and after getting the direction that Thunder Cloud has taken, will push for where you last saw Buffalo Bill, and follow on after him."

"And remember, you must try and find out who my *Shadow* is, Powell," and with a warm grasp of the hand General Custer and the Surgeon Scout parted—Doctor Frank speeding away on his double quest, to find Buffalo Bill and solve the mystery of the *Shadow*, while Custer went on his way to the fort.

The trail of the general's horse he readily followed, and approaching the spot where he had been told he would find the body of the deserter, he was surprised to discover that it was not there.

The ground was stained red, and that the spot was where Burton Segus had fallen, Frank Powell did not doubt; but he had not been killed by the shot, or if killed he had comrades near who had borne him off.

With his rifle ready for use the Surgeon Scout began a thorough search of the ground. The general's trail he followed readily, and there, on the hillside he discovered the trail of the strange girl's horse, where she had ridden to the spot from whence she had fired upon the deserter and then gone away.

Not far off was a trace of where an animal had been hitched to a tree.

The trail led to the spot, and off again over the same track.

"This is where Segus left his horse, for here is his boot trail to the valley."

"He was only wounded, merely stunned I guess, and coming to, departed."

"What a pity the general did not dismount and examine him."

"Now to see about Gaston's trail."

This was soon found out, and the keen eye of the trailer read where his horse, shod, had been led off among the Indian ponies, unshod.

"Well, with the girl's trail, that of Segus, and this one of Gaston, and a desire to find Buffalo Bill, I have my hands full."

"Now if brothers Will and George were only here, one could follow Segus, the other the Indians, and I would go after the girl, as the general wishes her existence kept secret, and we could meet at the point where Buffalo Bill parted with General Custer."

"But somehow I fear Bill may need help, so I'll go first in search of him," and the Surgeon Scout rode on, taking the trail of Thunder Cloud, as it lay in the direction he wished to go.

CHAPTER XV.

BUFFALO BILL'S DANGER.

It will be recalled that the point of observation, selected by Buffalo Bill to see those go by whose trail he was determined to follow, had, unfortunately for him, proven to be a hornets' nest, for his enemies went into camp for the night around the pile of rocks in which he had taken refuge.

A grim smile passed over the face of the scout, as he heard the words of the leader:

"We will camp here for the night, men, for there is a spring yonder, in that pile of rocks."

The "pile of rocks" was where Buffalo Bill was in hiding, and he knew that the spring was not twenty feet away.

The words of the leader had showed that the scout was right, for he was no Indian, though in the guise of such.

"I'm in for it," thought Cody, as he crouched back in his rocky retreat and awaited what might follow.

The pretended Indians, meanwhile, circled about the pile of rocks and staked out their horses, while they went into camp.

The animals bearing the dead were relieved of their hideous burdens, and a couple of the band who were wounded lay down near a fire which one of the men was building to cook the evening meal.

From his position Buffalo Bill could hear all that was said, and he heard the order given for two of the men to make a circuit of the camp to see that no enemy was near.

The fire had been built in between two rocks, and so sheltered by blankets that it could not be seen at a distance.

Then the men crouched about it and began to boil coffee and broil venison steaks upon the coals.

The tempting odor reached the nostrils of the scout, and he had to confess that he never was so hungry in his life, just because he was debarred from joining in the meal.

He knew that he would be instantly put to death, if discovered, and though he might carry company with him into the "great beyond," he felt that it would be sure death to him, where there were such terrible odds against him.

"I was looking for a good point of observation, and I got it," he concluded, with grim humor.

But he sat there, his rifle across his knees, his revolvers ready, determined to abide the result.

The band might not remain all night, and he would stand a chance of not being discovered; but the chances in favor of his discovery were great.

As the men grouped about the fire, eating their evening meal, every word they uttered Buffalo Bill caught.

"I say, pard, we had a rough time of it to-day," said one.

"You bet we did, and we couldn't expect any better when we tackled Custer and Cody."

"What on earth was they a-doin' right in that neighborhood to git in our way?" said another.

"They made us lose the gals."

"For sure, for we was gainin' on 'em well when ther general and Buffalo Bill chipped in."

"Ther cap'n won't be dead beat, though, for he means ter capture them gals, and he'll do it."

"You may take oath on that, pard, for when ther cap'n sets in to do a thing he gits thar."

"Then that man is not their leader after all," muttered Buffalo Bill, as he heard this, and he listened attentively to what followed.

"I say, pard, what does Cap'n Carl want with both of ther gals?"

"He's got some deep little game on hand, you bet, ther we don't know, in capturin' 'em both."

"They is beauties."

"Fer a fact they is."

"None o' ther young settlers seems ter win 'em."

"No, they hain't no fools, them gals o' Vassar's hain't, ter marry settlers, for they has their giddy heads set on officers from the fort."

"What a romantic thing it would be, if General Custer and Buffalo Bill were not married, after their having saved them to-day," observed

the man who was acting as leader, and who had ridden the spotted horse during the day.

"Well, we did our best and we lost 'em, and it's Cody and the general we has to thank for it, and for the killing of our comrades, too."

"But we'll even up on 'em some day, and don't you forget it."

"We will."

"Now you talk straight, pard."

"Let's mark them two men fer our game, pard."

A chorus of yells in the affirmative followed this remark, and the leader said:

"We have reason to fear Cody, for he will track us down, and it was to avoid this the captain made us play Injun."

"Then we have reason to fear Custer, for he will hang us, as sure as he catches us; so I say, too, pard, it's war to the end on Buffalo Bill and General Custer, and no mercy to either of them."

So said the leader, and the men were only too anxious to join with him in the threat against the brave soldier chief and the scout, whom they so greatly feared.

"Well, pards, it is wearing along, so let us turn in, for we must be going soon after midnight, as we don't dare tarry long until we get where the soldiers won't follow us."

"I'm going to find a soft rock, yonder, for my head," and taking his blankets, the outlaw walked toward the spot where Buffalo Bill was crouched, ready to face the ordeal.

CHAPTER XVI.

THE FOILED DESERTER.

THE man who had confronted General Custer, with his rifle covering his heart, was a desperate character.

He had entered the army as the spy of the captain of the Gold Ghouls, and when he decided to take his leave, by desertion, he had carried off with him a herd of valuable horses belonging to the fort.

For this crime and that of desertion—in the face of a foe, as it were, for the garrison was daily at war with the Sioux—he had been sentenced to death.

As has been stated, a decayed log in the guardhouse gave him egress, with his knife, which he had cleverly concealed about him and he had again sought his comrades in outlawry.

The haunt of the Gold Ghouls was known to be in the Indian country, where they could retreat in safety after any of their lawless acts, and there was not military force enough on the frontier, to invade the Sioux abiding-place to drive out the outlaws and also to punish the redskins, so General Custer had to be content in protecting the settlements as well as he could from the raids of Thunder Cloud and his warriors, and the Overland trails from the depredations of Clint Carl and his band.

When Clint Carl had decided, for some reason known to himself alone, to kidnap the Border Belles, he had laid a clever plot to do so.

His men had been disguised as Indians, and had been placed under Hazard Harry, his lieutenant, and a reckless youth who had sought the frontier to save himself from the gallows.

The handwriting of Henry Vassar had been cleverly imitated, the note written, and an Indian boy sent with it to Sunset Ranch.

That the plot had miscarried was owing, as the reader has seen, to the coming of Buffalo Bill and General Custer upon the scene.

With the failure of the plot, for the Gold Ghoul chief was near to discover that he had not been successful, he at once rode away from his point of observation, accompanied by one of his men.

The "chief" was a fine-looking man, sat his horse like one who had been born in the saddle, and his face was dark and threatening, as he noted the failure of his little plot to entrap the maidens.

His companion was the deserter, Burton Segus, a man of large stature, and a face stamped with evil.

After riding some distance, Clint Carl turned and said:

"Burt, I am foiled, and yet only for a while, for I am determined to get those girls in my power."

"Yes, chief."

"Hazard Harry will have to retreat now, with all haste, for he will doubtless be pursued, and I only hope that he will have the sense to carry his dead with him, for if he buries them, Buffalo Bill is sure to dig them up and discover that they are white men."

"I guess Hazard Harry will be shrewd enough for that, sir."

"I hope so, and I will here part with you, and you can return to the retreat on the lower trail, and there await orders from me."

"Would you mind, sir, if I delayed until tomorrow?"

"What have you on hand, Segus, for you know that you are in danger of recognition here, should you meet a soldier or a settler?"

"I know it, sir, but I'll risk capture to carry out my point."

"And that point is revenge, I can tell by the ugly look in your eyes," laughed the chief.

"It is," was the savage response.

"Well, what do you wish to do?"

"General Custer and Buffalo Bill have no troops with them."

"It is lucky for Hazard Harry and the men they have not."

"They have rescued the girls, and one of them will doubtless go home with them, remaining all night at Vassar's ranch."

"Which one?"

"The general."

"Why?"

"He will not remain longer away from the fort."

"And Buffalo Bill?"

"Will follow on Hazard Harry's trail."

"Ha! you think so?"

"Sure."

"I doubt it, for he is just off of some scout with General Custer."

"I know Buffalo Bill, and you mark my words, Captain Carl, he will go on the trail of our men, while General Custer escorts the girls home."

"Well?"

"He will, as I said, doubtless remain all night."

"And then?"

"If he does, he will take the Red Brook trail to the fort in the morning, and—I will be there."

"Ah! you wish to avenge yourself upon him?"

"I do, and will."

"Suppose he goes on to the fort to-night?"

"I will ambush him in either event."

"All right, Segus, do as you please; but remember you have a rope about your neck and should be careful."

"I don't think any one would know the short-haired, smooth-faced deserter, Burton Segus, in the long-haired, bearded man I am to-day."

"Custer has keen eyes, and so has Buffalo Bill."

"I want Custer to recognize me, just before I kill him."

"Well, do as you please, and then go to the retreat, as I told you," and with a wave of his hand Clint Carl rode away, leaving the detective alone in the timber where they had been in hiding.

The point was a high one, and they had gone there to await the coming of Hazard Harry and his intended captives.

Instead, they had seen the outlaws kept at bay, as they came flying down the prairie-like valley, by the daring of two men, who had rescued the Border Belles and then ridden with them toward their home.

As he sat there the deserter beheld a horseman appear in sight in the distance.

It was Buffalo Bill, just as he had predicted, following the trail of the kidnappers.

He observed the scout dismount and appear to be studying the trail well, after which he rode off in a direction that seemed to indicate an intention to get ahead of the kidnappers.

"It is as I thought, he goes after Hazard Harry and the general escorts the girls home."

"I will follow on the trail of Custer and watch my chance."

This Burton Segus did, and convinced that he meant to remain all night at Sunset Ranch, he went toward the Red Brook and camped there.

He had not seen the Sioux come there and lie in ambush, some distance from him, and the volley startled him which was fired upon Gaston the scout.

But he crept to a place of observation and held the Indians beat a hasty retreat, bearing with them a prisoner.

He at first thought it was General Custer, but he placed a small field-glass he carried to his eye and muttered:

"It is Gaston the courier, and the Sioux think they have Custer."

"They could not have fired on him, for he does not appear to be wounded, and yet there certainly were a dozen rifle-reports."

"Now where is Custer?"

It was not long before his question was answered by General Custer appearing in sight.

The man's face fairly gloated with fiendish joy, and he drew over it a cloth mask he took from his pocket and placed himself in position to attack his enemy.

The result is known, and that General Custer rode off believing that the mysterious mountain maiden had killed the deserter.

But the bullet had glanced upon his skull, inflicting an ugly flesh wound, and stunning him for some little time.

When he regained consciousness he gazed about him in a dazed kind of way, and then burst out into a laugh.

"Well, I'm not dead yet."

"But who fired that shot which so nearly ended me, for Custer did not do it?"

"No, it came from up yonder somewhere," and he pointed to the spot where the shot had come from.

"Who fired it?"

"Wonder if it was Buffalo Bill, who had come back from following Hazard Harry's trail?"

"No, for he would not have left me here,

but put me on my horse and carted me to the fort."

"I must find out."

He arose, and though a little shaky in his walk, found his horse where he had left him.

Then he discovered the track of the mountain maiden's horse, and mounting his own animal, he rode away, after having bathed his wound at the brook and bandaged it up as best he could.

"It is only postponed," he muttered, "and the one who saved him and scarred me for life must die, too."

"I can wait," and the deserter rode rapidly on his way, with joy at his escape from death and regret at his having been foiled in his revenge.

CHAPTER XVII.

ON THE TRAIL.

WHEN the leader of the outlaws, who was the man the chief and the deserter had referred to as Hazard Harry, said that he was going to find the soft side of a rock, on which to make his bed, he stopped within six feet of Buffalo Bill.

There he seemed to be suited and made up his blanket bed, lying down upon it with little thought that he was covered by the muzzle of a repeating-rifle.

The scout did not move, he scarcely dared breathe, and he sat like one who had made up his mind to die game, if die he must.

He would ask no mercy, and none would he give.

Other outlaws followed the example of Hazard Harry and camped about among the rocks, until Buffalo Bill was in the very center of half a dozen men, any one of whom he could have almost touched with the end of his rifle.

It was a most critical position for a man, and it required just such nerves as the scout possessed not to break down under the painful ordeal.

His position, fortunately, was a crevice in the rocks, large as a hogshead and about as deep, and here he sat waiting and watching.

The outlaws, excepting one who stood on guard, or walked around the camp as the humor suited him, were all asleep, and only the snoring of one man, and the cropping of grass of the horses not far away, broke the silence.

Thus the hours passed away, and never in his life before had sixty minutes seemed so near akin in time to sixty hours as Buffalo Bill then thought them.

He had hoped to be able to leave his retreat when the men got to sleep; but they had unintentionally foiled this by camping about him on the rocks.

So he could but wait and wonder if they would leave without discovering him.

Midnight came and passed.

The horses had gotten tired of feeding and lain down to rest.

The sentinel alone of the band was awake and on the alert.

Buffalo Bill could see him now and then as he raised up and peered over the rocks, passing from point to point.

At last two o'clock came, and the scout heard a rapid step.

It was the sentinel coming to awaken his comrades.

"Come, pards, it's two hours to day and we must be moving, for we don't know who's on our trail," he called out.

Like all men who sleep with their lives in danger, the outlaws were at once awake, and the work began of getting ready for the march.

The horses were saddled, the dead bodies strapped on as before, the wounded men aided to mount, and the party moved off.

It was with difficulty that Buffalo Bill could restrain himself from uttering a wild war-whoop of delight.

His nerves had stood the strain, but he wished to relieve his suppressed feelings with a shout.

But he refrained from so doing, and taking the trail to where he had left his horse he found him all right and quickly lay down to gain some rest, for he needed it.

He was astir soon after sunrise, cooked his frugal breakfast, and then mounting rode off again on the trail.

"I know that they are, as I said they were, Gold Ghouls; but I will follow them to their retreat, so as to know where it is, and just what force I have," said the scout, as he struck the trail of the outlaws.

With the greatest caution he followed them, flanking by a wide *detour* every spot that he came to which was a good place for an ambush.

He had again struck the trail after one of these *detours*, when suddenly he drew rein, for he saw some one in the path before him.

But after a glance he rode on once more, as he had recognized the Mountain Maid of Mystery.

"What can she be doing here?"

"And yet it is not out of the way that she should be here, as I am on the trail to where we last saw her," muttered the scout.

Calmly seated upon her horse she awaited his approach, and as he drew near she nodded pleasantly, while he, raising his sombrero with marked respect, said:

"Well, miss, I had not hoped for the pleasure of seeing you so soon again."

"I am here, Buffalo Bill, to save you from death," was the reply.

"Indeed! must I again owe you my life?" he said, with a smile.

"You are pursuing the Gold Ghouls, who are disguised as Sioux?"

"How do you know?"

"It matters not how I know, but such is the case."

"I will not deny it."

"You hope to track them to their retreat?"

"You seem well informed."

"I am, and I know that you are going straight to your death."

"Indeed?"

"Yes, for you are going into a trap."

"As bad a one as that which you so nobly helped the general and myself out of?"

"Yes, and I warn you to return to the fort, for the general has gone there."

"You know this?"

"Yes, as I know that he was ambushed on the way."

"Ha! has harm befallen the general?" cried the scout, in alarm.

"No, but he was never nearer death than he was this morning."

"I beg you to tell me what occurred?"

"Ask him."

"But he is not here to ask."

"When you see him, then."

"I would prefer that you told me."

"I will not; but I will tell you that, bravest of the brave though you are, you are trifling with death to follow the trail you are now pursuing."

"In what way more than the ordinary dangers that beset the path of a scout?"

"You are again entering the Indian country."

"I know that well."

"And are pursuing men whom you have discovered are Gold Ghouls—white men in disguise?"

"True."

"Go back."

"But why?"

"Are you so confident in your own skill and courage as to wish to run into a trap where you will have a hundred men to oppose you?"

"Oh no!"

"Then return."

"You do not wish me to follow the Gold Ghouls?"

"No."

"What are they to you?"

"It is your safety I am looking after now."

"Yet you know these Gold Ghouls?"

She was silent.

"You know Clint Carl?"

Still she remained silent.

"I believe, after all, you know the Gold Ghouls; in fact may be—"

"What?"

"I can hardly tell, for I was going to say in league with them."

"Are you?"

"I cannot tell."

"They are allies with the Sioux, or at least the red-skins give them shelter in their country, and they have a retreat there, and you certainly have a wonderful knowledge of the mountains and prairies, and must have power too, to act as you do."

She made no reply, and the scout said kindly:

"This is no life for you to lead, for you are beautiful, young, you appear even far above the average border girl, and yet you are the companion of—"

He paused and she asked bluntly:

"Of whom?"

"Outlaws and Indians."

"Whatever I may be, whoever I am, Buffalo Bill, I demand that you return the way you have come."

"You demand it?"

"Yes."

"And why?"

"To save your life."

"What am I to you?"

"A fellow-being," was the earnest response.

"Will you go back?" she queried, as he remained silent.

"I have no desire to go on to my death by this trail."

"I understand you, Buffalo Bill, you mean to leave this trail and go by another into the mountains."

He smiled, and she said:

"Let me prove to you that your life is in danger."

"Well?"

"You have not followed closely on this trail, but made wide circuits to avoid being entrapped."

"You are shrewd, and skilled in Indian cunning, and yet you are but a man and can be overcome."

"Go back on this trail, and when you come to the second hill from here, dismount, go cautiously toward a thicket of pines, and you will find there a man lying in wait to report the coming of any one on the track of the Gold Ghouls."

"From his point of lookout he can see across the plain several miles, and you were not seen by him, as you left the trail and came around by the ridge."

"How know you this?"

"It matters not; but I know it, so heed my warning and return."

"The man is a Gold Ghoul?"

"Yes."

"I will return."

"I am glad to hear you say so."

"You will not tell me something of yourself?"

"No."

"I am sorry: but I thank you for what you have done for me."

"Good-by, and be on the watch on your border, for there is trouble not far away."

"From whom?"

"I can say no more."

"Shall I take this trail back?"

"Yes."

"And the Gold Ghoul on watch?"

"I have nothing to do with him."

"Suppose I kill him?"

"That is your affair, not mine. Good-by."

She wheeled her horse as she spoke and rode rapidly away, while the scout gazed after her and said aloud:

"She is a remarkable creature, that is certain; but I shall heed her warning and take the back trail, for I wish to make the acquaintance of the Gold Ghoul she said was on the watch."

So saying, he rode back on the Gold Ghoul's trail.

CHAPTER XVIII.

THE MYSTERIOUS TRAILER.

THE young ranchero, Gabriel Golden, whom the reader will remember to have met at the Sunset Ranch the night that General Custer was a guest there, was considered a great "catch" along the border, for there were designing maidens looking out for good husbands for their daughters along the frontier, as well as in the gay society of city life.

He was handsome, that no one denied, and his manners were most winning with young girls and old people, though to men of his own age he appeared reserved and almost stern.

He had a good ranch, was constantly adding to his stock, and there were many girls in the settlement that would gladly accept him as a husband.

But the young ranchero had turned his eyes upon the daughters of Henry Vassar.

They were certainly far more lovely than any other maidens in the settlement, both in face and form, and then they were educated, refined and accomplished in a remarkable degree for young ladies who were to dwell in a cabin upon the frontier, doing their own work, and with no society such as they were competent to shine in.

Which of the two Gabriel Golden liked the best neither Ruby nor Pearl had been able to guess.

They liked him, and yet neither had shown a preference for him.

The second day after the visit of General Custer and the escape of the maidens from the kidnappers, their father came home in the evening with a face that showed he had some cause of worry.

So, after the supper was over, the two girls asked him what it was that worried him.

"Who said I was worried, Ruby?" he asked with a smile.

"Your face."

"Yes, we saw that there was some trouble upon your mind, father, as soon as you came home," Pearl said.

"Well, the truth is, girls, I have a secret that I am keeping from you—

"There, don't look so scared, for it is nothing wrong, only I have a secret, and I do not intend to make it known yet awhile."

"Oh, father!"

"Father, you are cruel."

"Oh yes, I know it is hard to tax a woman's curiosity, but I will not tell you yet awhile, for in fact I hardly know yet what there is to divulge."

"But it is not this that worries me tonight."

"Well, father, will you tell us that much?"

"Yes, tell us what worries you at least."

"You know I often go out hunting of late?"

"Yes, sir, and you never used to go," Pearl said.

"No, we do the shooting, and you do the hunting, for it's little game you ever bring home," laughed Ruby.

"That is so, Ruby; but I have noticed several times of late that I have been followed in my hunting tramps."

"Followed, father?" and Pearl looked a little alarmed.

"Who follows you, sir?"

"I don't know, but I have noticed a trail following my own, and yet I can see no one."

"Lordy! don't say there are spooks out here, father," and Ruby shuddered.

"I think the one who trails me, Ruby, is more substantial than a spook, for he smokes cigars, and leaves a good track."

"Who can he be?"

"That is what I would like to know."

"Can you not lie in wait for him, sir?"

"I have done so twice, and neither time did he show himself, and yet there was his track, nearly up to where I had stopped, and there it branched off."

"This is strange, father," said Pearl.

"Strange indeed; but what can his motive be?" asked Ruby.

"That is my secret, or rather bears on it, I fear; but it is a disagreeable feeling to be dogged in this way, and I wish I could find out who he is."

"Let us help you, father?" asked Ruby.

"How can you, my child?"

"Have you any particular place where you go hunting?"

"Well, yes."

"Well, father, you lay out a course to take, and tell us which way you will go."

"We will leave the house some time after, go in a roundabout way and cross your path at a given point."

"If the trail is there, of the one who follows you, we will ride on swiftly and try and overtake him."

"If it is not, we will hide our horses, and lie in wait ourselves for his coming."

"Yes, that is a splendid plan, Ruby, and we can discover just who this mysterious trailer is," Pearl said.

"You are brave girls, my daughters; but I do not wish to bring you into any danger."

"Oh, we will go well armed, sir, and if we are on the alert we will surprise your trailer, I can assure you."

"I have half a mind to let you try, for I confess this having my steps dogged, as they have been of late, does worry me."

"It is like watching for a blow in the back all the time."

"Well, sir, we will carry out Ruby's plot, and if we don't succeed, then we will have to ask—"

"Who?" said Ruby as Pearl paused.

"Buffalo Bill to discover the secret trailer for us."

"Or Gabriel Golden," said Ruby with a sly glance at Pearl.

"I do not doubt but that Mr. Golden would be glad to help us," said Pearl, who really liked the young ranchero more than she cared to admit.

"Yes, and he is a good trailer too, and a fine fellow," remarked Henry Vassar, who was more than willing that Gabriel Golden should win one of his daughters, and thought that he had detected in the young man's manner a partiality for Ruby, while of the two Pearl seemed to like him best.

"He is a fine fellow, and I think he'd make an excellent—"

Ruby paused and Pearl asked:

"What?"

"Brother-in-law," was Ruby's sly remark, and Pearl blushed and said quickly:

"But why ask any one until we fail?"

"And we must not fail, for we can find out this mysterious trailer," Ruby replied, and then it was arranged just what trail their father was to take upon the following day, and at what point they were to cross it, about ten minutes after he had gone along.

Full of their plot the sisters then sought their cosey room to retire, while their father went out to look around the house, as was his wont every night, to see that all was right before going to bed.

As he stepped out of the door he heard steps rapidly moving away, and blinded by the light indoors, he could not see who it was, but called out:

"Hold, there! who are you?"

No reply came, and the steps sounded quicker.

"Hold, or I fire!" cried the settler, and his eyes becoming accustomed to the darkness

"To-morrow will show then who he is," said Ruby, and locking up the barn and scolding the three large watchdogs for their neglect of duty, in being won over by a stranger who fed them, the settler returned to the cabin with his daughters, still more impressed by the fact that he was being shadowed by some mysterious personage.

CHAPTER XIX.

NIGHT HAWK AND BRONCHO BILL.

The return of General Custer to Fort Fearless, was greeted by his soldiers with cheers when they beheld him coming alone across the prairies.

They had been most anxious regarding his safety; but then it was his way, to make scouting trips about the fort, and many a time had he gotten into desperate peril thereby.

His having gone with Buffalo Bill was a satisfaction to those who looked to his safety, as the famous scout was known to be the king of plainsmen, and at the same time would not permit his general to go into any unnecessary danger.

There was a great anxiety felt about the scout, when they saw General Custer returning alone, but when it was known that Buffalo Bill had gone off on another scouting expedition, it was considered all right.

Arriving at his headquarters, General Custer first went over the dispatches and letters that had arrived for him in his absence, and then called his staff about him.

He made known to them that Thunder Cloud was on the war-path, and to have all ready at the post to meet an attack, or make one.

He told of his adventure with Segus the deserter, and ordered a party of soldiers sent out to bury him, the officers inferring by the general's words that the man had fallen under the fire of White Beaver, the Surgeon Scout, as he had spoken of fortunately meeting that officer.

The party was dispatched to bury the deserter, and then the general sent for two men to come to his quarters, who are known to fame as Night Hawk George and Broncho Bill.

They were scouts at the fort, and were devoting their spare time to the study of medicine and surgery under their brother, the Surgeon Scout.

They soon appeared, and the two were striking looking men not often seen together.

Night Hawk George was tall, and wiry in face, his movements quick and decided, and his face, clean cut in every feature, strong in characteristics, and that of a man who would do or dare anything.

His eyes were as piercing as a hawk's, and his movements reminded one of an Indian.

He had a quiet, self-possessed manner, and a serious, thoughtful face.

His brother, Broncho Bill, was hardly up to the medium height, compactly built, and possessed a face handsome as a woman's, but with strength in every feature.

His eyes were indigo blue, laughing merry eyes, except in anger, when they grew black and piercing.

Indelibly stamped upon his face was determined courage, amounting to recklessness from the smile that hovered about his lips in danger.

Both brothers resembled their brother, White Beaver, and were also like each other, and yet unlike.

They wore their raven black hair long, it falling below their shoulders, and their dress was half-military, half-buckskin, while their arms were of the best.

Like their brother, the Surgeon Scout, Night Hawk and Broncho Bill were superb horsemen, dead shots, and could follow any trail that an Indian could, while Buffalo Bill was wont to say that he would rather have the Powell Pards to back him up in a tight place than half a hundred of ordinary men.

"Glad to see you back safe, general," said Broncho Bill, in his free-and-easy way, as he entered the general's quarters with his brother, in obedience to the summons.

"Thank you, Powell, and I am willing to get back, for I have had something of a hard trip of it; but I have work for you and Night Hawk."

"We are ready, sir," quietly said Night Hawk George.

"On our way back to the fort, we fell in with those two pretty daughters of Settler Vassar, the Border Belles, and they were being chased by a dozen or more red-skins, but which Cody declares were white men disguised as such, so I yield to his superior knowledge."

"They were whites in red skin togs if Bill said so, general," Broncho Bill remarked.

"Well, we joined in the chase with the girls and got them out of the scrape, and while I went by Sunset Ranch with them, Buffalo Bill set off on the trail of their pursuers."

"When was this, general?"

"Yesterday afternoon, and I feel anxious about him."

"I met your brother, and he was to go on Bill's trail, leaving a marked trail which I wish you two to follow, and you also must leave a track that can be readily followed, for I will

come on to-morrow with two companies of cavalry, and we will show the Sioux we are on the war-path and force them back to their villages, fearing an attack from us."

"If you come up with your brother and Cody, try and find out all you can as to the movements of that band of outlaws, the Gold Ghouls, and also of Thunder Cloud and his braves, for we might make a dash into their lines and deal them a hard blow."

"Yes, sir, but your force will be a small one with which to penetrate the Indian country, general."

"Not if I make a flying attack, Night Hawk, for my desire is to strike them so that it will prevent their intended blow at the settlements, for we have not force enough to meet a general uprising of the Sioux."

"No, sir, that is true, and a quick and decided blow at their villages may keep them at home until you get the reinforcements you expect."

"Well, we will make the attempt, anyhow."

"And we will be ready to depart, sir, within the hour," said Night Hawk, and the brothers left the quarters of the general.

As they were riding out of the stockade, they met the party of soldiers returning, who had gone out to bury the deserter, and hearing their report, the brothers were again called to the general's quarters.

In a few words he told them of his having been halted by the deserter, and owing his life to one whom he did not however name, and that he certainly had considered Segus dead.

"There was a bullet-wound in his head, and I cannot account for his disappearance, and would suppose that Surgeon Powell must have gotten rid of the body in some way, only the men report no newly made grave was near, nor were there any signs that showed which way the corpse had been taken, if the deserter was really killed."

"So here is another mystery for you to solve, and I leave it to you to do so," said the general.

Night Hawk George and Broncho Bill then left the post, and soon after were riding away from the post in a canter, both being splendidly mounted.

They reached the scene where the deserter had ambushed General Custer, and had fallen at the fire of the mysterious maiden, and reading the signs like an open book, saw where Gaston the courier had been captured by the Indians.

The trail of the deserter, of the strange girl, and of the Sioux bearing off the courier, were discovered, and the brothers then set off upon the trail left by the Surgeon Scout, just as the sun was nearing the faraway mountain horizon.

CHAPTER XX.

THE CAPTURED COURIER.

LITTLE dreaming of danger, when he had passed through the country where he expected to meet with an attack at any moment, Gaston the courier rode on through the fort, after having met General Custer and given up to him his dispatches.

He was surprised that the general had remained behind alone, but kept his surprise to himself, and rode on his way.

He had been in the saddle all night, and leaving his horse to keep the trail dropped into a nap as he went along.

Suddenly he was awakened by a number of shots, a couple of lariats were thrown over him, his horse was seized and he was dragged from his saddle before he could offer the slightest resistance.

Had he not been caught napping, resistance would have been in vain against the half-hundred Sioux that had surprised him.

They had simply fired in the air, not intending to hit him, and, to his amazement they did not harm him, other than to somewhat roughly bind him to his horse.

Then they ran for their ponies, hidden in the thickets on the hillside, and set off at a gallop across the prairies.

Again, to his surprise, the courier was placed alongside of the great chief, Thunder Cloud, the two riding together.

Gaston took his capture coolly.

He was a brave man, and he had no hope of escape, but his heart did not fail him.

The vilest torture he expected would be his fate, and yet he would show his captors that he was no coward.

At last the secret of his capture and treatment leaked out.

Thunder Cloud was a young chief, who did not deign to speak the language of his foes, the pale-faces, though it was to a limited extent.

So he said, by way of showing the prisoner his own greatness:

"Thunder Cloud great chief."

"You think so, do you?" returned Gaston.

"Have got big white chief Yellow Hair at last."

Gaston started.

He knew that the Sioux called General Custer the Yellow-Haired Chief.

He was proud of his resemblance to the general, and the fact that he had met him not far from where he had been captured, proved that the red-skins had been lying in wait for the gallant commander of Fort Fearless.

"I see it all; they think they have got the general."

"Let them think so, and if they torture me to death, as they will, I will die as gamely as my noble general would die."

So he mused, and then he said aloud:

"Well, what does Thunder Cloud intend to do with Yellow Hair?"

"Kill him."

"That's what I thought; but when?"

"Have big pow-wow in village."

"I don't doubt it, and I'll be the chief mourner," muttered Gaston.

"Make pale-face chief cry."

"You're a liar, there, General Thunder Cloud, for pale-face soldiers leave their tears with their families, when they enlist."

"Burn Yellow Hair."

"Many a brave man has been burned before my time by you murderous red-skins."

"Want Pa-e-has-ka scalp, too," said Thunder Cloud, referring to Buffalo Bill by his Indian name.

"You'll have to get it, then, chief."

"Want mighty medicine-man scalp, too."

"White Beaver, the Surgeon Scout?"

"Yes."

"There's another scalp you'll find hard to pull off."

"Want Night Hawk scalp, and Blue Eye scalp."

"You mean Broncho Bill?"

"Ugh!"

"You want the earth, Injun; but when do you intend to go into this wholesale hair business?"

"Don't know pale-face talk."

"Oh! you don't understand?"

"Ugh!"

"When do you intend getting these scalps you speak of?"

"Pretty soon."

Gaston laughed and Thunder Cloud scowled and remained silent.

Pushing rapidly on they reached the Indian village during the night.

The village was a large one, and the head chief was Panther Eye, the old medicine-man and the father of Thunder Cloud, who had taken his aged father's place as the war-chief.

No better place could have been selected for a village than the one which Thunder Cloud had chosen, for its approach in the mountains was almost inaccessible, while, once there, a number of fertile valleys surrounded it, through which wound a stream as clear as crystal.

The whole mountain-top was a valley, and its sides were a natural fortress.

Arriving in camp with their prisoner, the Indians almost went mad with joy at the knowledge that the great Yellow-Haired Chief of the pale-face braves had been captured.

For safe-keeping the supposed general was taken to the Medicine Lodge of old Panther Eye, whose living tepee was but a few steps away.

In spite of his old age Panther Eye was feared by all of his people, even the great Thunder Cloud standing in awe of him, and when he ordered that the white chief should be confined in the Medicine Lodge it was done, and the scout was left alone with his bitter thoughts, for he did not doubt but that the morrow would usher in his death by the most cruel torture.

A sentinel, silent as a bronze statue, stood guard without, and when the uproar in the village died away the courier, strange as it may seem under the circumstances, dropped off into a peaceful sleep, his dreams undisturbed by the fate that the Indians intended should be his.

CHAPTER XXI.

THE HAUNTED VILLAGE.

It is not customary for the conscience of an Indian to give him any trouble, unless it smites him for not having done some act of cruelty which he had neglected.

And yet there had been one thing that old Panther Eye and his tribe had regretted.

They had captured a pale-face maiden on one occasion and brought her to their camp, then in another part of the country.

Decrepit, old as he was, Panther Eye had claimed her for his wife as the only means of saving her from death.

If she refused, she must die.

She was a nun, taken from her post of duty in a settlement where she had gone to nurse the sick during an epidemic.

Beautiful in face and form, in her robe of a nun she looked doubly so, and her attire and the cross she wore had at first kept her from harm.

But old Panther Eye had fallen in love with her in his Indian way, and he was deaf to all of her pleadings.

She appealed to him in English, which he understood, to spare her and let her return to her people.

She had told him that she was a child of the Great Spirit, and begged that he would let her die at the stake, rather than force her to become his wife.

The old scamp was not to be moved, and turning upon him, she cried:

"Behold! the Great Spirit calls to his child to come!"

With a bound she dashed from him along the ridge, to the end where there was a high cliff overhanging a surging stream hundreds of feet below.

Not a hand dared stay her progress, for one who would commit suicide, in the eyes of the Indians, is sacred.

They all saw her purpose, and for once the red-skins stood passive while their captive fled from them.

On reaching the cliff, and seeing that she was not pursued, the captive nun turned and looked back at the Indians.

Then she raised her hands, as though in prayer, and with a leap went over the cliff.

The act of the beautiful nun so affected old Panther Eye, that he remained in his tepee for days.

Then he came forth one night, but it was at the cry of his people, that the nun's spirit had come back from the happy hunting-grounds, and was walking through the village.

He gazed with horror at the form gliding along, rather than walking, and the red-skins shrank from her path in fear.

The moonlight shone brightly and all saw the slender form, clad in the black garb of a nun, and watched her until she walked off in the woods and disappeared.

Then the old chief gave orders that the village should be removed from that spot, and another camping-place was found half a hundred miles away.

But still, at the full of the moon the nun's spirit appeared there, and was wont to glide through the village.

Again the red-skins moved, and this time it was to the valley on the mountain-top, where they dwelt at the time this story opens.

But there also had the nun been seen, and it was said that old Panther Eye was failing under the dread sight.

The night after the coming of Gaston the courier, as a prisoner, to the Sioux village, the warrior who stood on guard over him, at the Medicine Lodge, was startled to have the nun's spirit suddenly appear before him.

He was a young brave who would fight his weight in wildcats, but drew the line at any visitor from the happy hunting-grounds, and he trembled violently as he saw the sable-clad form approach.

He did not run away, however, and approaching close to him the spirit nun beckoned that he should follow.

He obeyed without an instant of hesitation. She led him away from the lodge, out into the timber and halted at a lonely spot some distance from the camp. Hardly had the red-skin come to a halt when suddenly he was in the grasp of two men, who held him in a grip that he was utterly powerless to shake off, while the clutch upon his throat prevented any outcry.

With a celerity that was remarkable, the red-skin was bound, gagged, and the men arose from their quick work, leaving him lying prostrate on and helpless upon the ground.

But the sable-robed form had vanished as quickly as she had come, and was hastening back through the timber toward the Indian village.

Entering it, all was silent, except the whine of some hungry dog skulking about, and she went boldly to the Medicine Lodge.

Disappearing within, in ten minutes she came out again.

But she was not alone. With her was Gaston the courier.

He walked slowly, and with an effort, from having been so long and securely bound, and yet he followed her with the air of a man who knew that his life depended upon it.

Out into the timber she led him, following the trail she had taken the horse, and yet halting ere she came to where he was lying.

Then she pointed down the hillside, as indicative of her meaning that the scout should go in that direction.

"One moment, please," he said eagerly.

But she made an impatient gesture and still pointed down the hill.

"To whom do I owe my life?" he urged.

She turned away in silence and retraced her way toward the Indian village, leaving the courier standing and gazing after her in wonder at his release by one who appeared to be a nun, in an Indian village, and whose conduct was so very strange.

CHAPTER XXII.

WHAT HENRY VASSAR FAILED TO SEE.

THE morning after their fright, at there having been a man lurking about their house, who had quickly locked up the dogs and fed them, and evidently came with evil intent, Ruby and Pearl arose with a feeling of importance at the duty they were to perform that morning.

They had an early breakfast, and having gone over with their father the place mapped out, had seen him ride away.

Then they had gone after their ponies, and well armed, mounted and rode off in another direction, both of them chiding the watchdogs who were left in charge for their neglect or duty the night before.

The dogs seemed to feel mortified at what

they had done, and hung their heads at the words of their fair mistress.

More than he cared to admit to himself, Henry Vassar was worried at his steps having been dogged as they had been.

Then, too, the affair of the night before caused him to connect the one who followed him with the one who had visited his home under cover of the darkness.

The truth is, Henry Vassar had a secret, and an important one, and he wished to keep it from every one.

What that secret is, the story will reveal in good time; but certainly it was a heavy load for the settler to carry about with him day and night.

After leaving his home he went off upon the trail agreed to between himself and daughters, and seemed to be wholly unconscious of the fact that he expected to have his steps dogged by an unknown foe.

Who it was he could not for the life of him think.

But the reason the man might have for tracking him, Henry Vassar knew; but that was the secret he would not reveal.

As he went along he failed to see in a clump of pines on his right, two men standing not a hundred yards away from where he passed.

Had he looked that way he would have seen one man under the revolver of another.

He would have seen that one man thus cowed, gazing upon him appealingly, the hope in his eyes that he would see him and come to his aid.

But Henry Vassar, good frontiersman that he was, failed to see that thrilling little tableau, and passed on his way.

When he had gone from view the man who was held by the other's revolver groaned, as though in mental, rather than physical anguish.

The one who thus held him cowed smiled grimly and remarked:

"You were sure to make no outcry."

"It would have been death?"

"Yes."

"You will kill me, anyway?"

"No, I am not one to kill a man who holds no chance for life, unless he drives me to it."

"Had you called out just now for aid to Henry Vassar, you would have driven me to the act of sending a bullet through your brain."

"And as I did not?"

"You shall have a chance for life."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean that I have befriended you, I have clothed you, given you food and gold, when you were only a vagabond, kicked about by all."

"In return you have proven treacherous, and meant to ruin me if you could, by your treachery."

"I did not."

"Then why are you here?"

The man was silent.

"Why are you here in the vicinity of Vassar's home, if not to destroy me if in your power?"

"I have a motive in being here."

"I know your motive."

The man started.

Then he asked:

"Tell me it?"

"To betray me!"

His face brightened, and he shook his head.

"What then was your motive?"

"I cannot tell."

"You are as treacherous as a snake, Cunning Kit, and are well named."

"We were boys together, and it was then I knew you as you were; but I was your friend in those days, and I did not believe it when they said you had robbed your poor old mother of her life's savings and run away."

"Oh, don't speak of that, I beg of you."

"Bah! don't pretend remorse you do not feel, for your act broke your mother's heart, and I buried her, as you had left her a pauper."

"I knew you when I saw you here on the border, vagabond though you were, sneaking around among the mining-camps, and pitying you, I did all in my power for you."

"I know that you were kind to me."

"And you have repaid me, how?"

"I have done nothing, not one thing to harm you."

"You intended to."

"No."

"Then why did you lead me to suppose you were killed in the camp, some months ago?"

"I wished to run away from you because your face brought up the haunting memory of my mother."

"Bah! that is a poor excuse, and it is not the truth."

"It is."

"Then why are you here?"

"I have a purpose."

"What purpose have you to skulk through this settlement, and I know that you were lying in wait here for Henry Vassar when I came up and surprised you."

"I was not."

"I do not believe you."

"If I tell you my motive will you be my friend again?"

"I make no promises."

"Will you let me go free?"

"I will not pledge myself in anything to you, Cunning Kit."

"I will tell you."

"Out with it, then."

The man looked about him in a strange way, then bent forward, and as though seeming to fear that the trees might even hear him, whispered something in the ear of the one who still held him covered by his revolver.

The hearer started, his face flushed, and he said, sternly:

"I do not believe you, Cunning Kit."

"Before High Heaven it is true."

"I do not believe you, and I am but wasting time."

"Come, stand there where you are, and I will place your revolver ten paces away."

"I will walk the same distance off, and then you are to advance, seize your weapon and open fire on me."

"I will not fire until you have your weapon in hand, so we meet on equal terms."

"For God's sake, don't demand this of me!" cried the man.

"It must be, Cunning Kit, so face me, for I give you a chance for your life and to kill me, and may the best man win the game against death."

CHAPTER XXIII.

A DUEL WITH AN AMBUSHED FOE.

HAVING been forced, by his good common sense to turn back on the trail he was following, after the warning of the mysterious girl who had before served him so well, Buffalo Bill felt in a very good humor for a fracas with the man whom she had said was watching on the ridge.

Had she told him of this man to warn him of danger there, or because she wished to get rid of the individual on watch, by an encounter with him, Buffalo Bill could not understand.

If she was a white captive among the Indians, why did she not leave them when the opportunity was offered to her?

If she was the friend of the Gold Ghouls, why did she tell him where there was one on the watch for his coming along their trail from the other direction?

These questions the scout could not answer, and so he dismissed them from his thoughts, and at once determined to "interview" the Gold Ghoul in Indian guise who was waiting on the ridge, to see if the kidnapping party were followed by Buffalo Bill or others.

Arriving in sight of the point of lookout, where the girl had said the Gold Ghoul was on picket duty, Buffalo Bill made a flank movement, intending to leave his horse at a safe distance and then proceed on foot in quest of the man he was now anxious to find.

But Buffalo Bill had not counted upon one thing, nor had the Maid of the Mountains looked to this contingency, and that was the fact that her watcher might leave his post before the scout arrived.

This the Gold Ghoul did, for he had orders from Hazard Harry to await only a certain time and then come on to the retreat.

The "certain time," expired about the time that Buffalo Bill started in search of him, and he, from his better point of observation on the hill, saw the scout coming toward the ridge.

Instantly he decided to ambush the man that he and his outlaw comrades so feared, for he knew Buffalo Bill by sight, and could not mistake him now.

How he got around him he did not then stop to consider, when he had been looking for him, if he came at all, from the opposite direction.

But there he was, sure enough, and he meant to kill him and thus make a hero of himself for all time.

So he sprung from his horse and ran to a large rock which would afford him good shelter, and then he crouched down awaiting the coming of the scout.

A couple of hundred yards away the scout halted.

He seemed about to strike off in another direction.

Was it fate that led him to hold on his way, and which would bring him near the rock, yes, within thirty feet of it?

The Gold Ghoul was a large man, and wore Indian toggery from head to foot.

His face was painted, too, or rather had been, but the paint was rubbing off and it left him looking most hideous.

He got his rifle ready, rested the muzzle upon the rock and waited.

About the rock were growing several dwarf pines, and one of these sheltered the Gold Ghoul well.

Nearer came the scout, and soon he was within easy pistol range.

Then came the time for the Gold Ghoul to do his deadly, cowardly act.

He took a deadly aim directly at the head of the scout, and with a hand as firm as the rock on which rested his rifle-barrel.

He was sure of his victim, so he did not become nervous.

Then the forefinger touched trigger, and—the cap snapped!

A curse broke from the Gold Ghoul's lips as he saw the snow-white horse of the scout wheel upon his hind-legs as though upon a pivot, and attempt to dash away.

But he was checked by a strong hand, wheeled back again, facing his foe, the spurs sunk deep, and with revolver in hand Buffalo Bill charged directly upon the ambush.

It had not taken a second of time, and he knew not who or what he was to meet, for it was a mile away to where he had expected to find the Gold Ghoul.

But he meant to face his foe in ambush.

The Gold Ghoul was almost unnerved by the snapping of the cap on the rifle.

He hastily dropped the useless weapon, drew a revolver, and his shot resounded with one from the scout.

He was flurried, however, and his aim was not true, for it did not find the heart it was sent in search of.

Instead, it passed through the left arm of the scout.

But his aim had been more deadly, for his bullet reached the heart of the Ghoul, who, falling, fired again, this time killing the white horse of Buffalo Bill.

Down went the animal, and his rider was pinned to the ground beneath him.

But he still grasped his trusty revolver to continue the fight.

But there was no need of it, for the shot that killed the scout's horse had been the last shot of the Gold Ghoul, who sunk dead in his tracks.

"I guess I finished him," coolly muttered Buffalo Bill, and then he turned his attention to extricating himself from his position, which, with his horse pinning him down by lying on his leg, which was bruised badly, and a bullet-wound in his arm, was by no means a pleasant one, for alone, horseless, almost helpless, the scout knew well his peril.

CHAPTER XXIV.

THE MEETING OF THE TRAILERS.

WHEN Surgeon Powell struck the trail of Buffalo Bill, following on after the Gold Ghouls, he stuck to it untiringly.

The different flank movements he made from the trail he took also, having studied the hoof-track of the horse which the daring scout was riding.

Observing that it each time returned to the large trail made by the outlaws, the Surgeon Scout understood that the reason of Buffalo Bill for thus diverging was not to be entrapped at any point he noted as favorable for an ambush, and feeling that he could make better time by pressing straight on, he did so, in each case noting where the scout left the track and returned to it again.

At length he came to where he had to cross the prairie-like valley, open to the eye of any one on the ridge beyond.

He cared not to boldly push across it, so followed the trail of the scout where it diverged to the left.

It crossed the valley miles below, and under the shelter of some trees that fringed a stream, which would prevent his being seen by any one upon the ridge.

He had flanked the ridge, reached the spot where two trails met, that of the strange girl and Buffalo Bill, and wondering who it could be that had been there with the scout, he again set out upon the work before him.

"Some one met Bill here and turned him back," he mused, as he rode on.

He had not gone very far before he heard the report of firearms.

Instantly he drew rein, for he knew he was in a country where it behooved him to be most cautious.

Hearing no other firing, he again advanced slowly and with his rifle ready.

Then he discovered something ahead, upon which his eyes became riveted for an instant.

His next move was to spur forward at a gallop, and a moment after he had drawn rein and sprung from his horse.

"Great God! Bill, are you badly hurt?" he cried, anxiously, as he bent over the scout, who had been endeavoring to get his leg out from beneath his dead horse.

"I'm more than glad to see you, Doc, for, though I'm not much hurt, I'm in a bad fix," said Buffalo Bill.

With an exertion of his great strength the Surgeon Scout drew the horse from off the leg of Buffalo Bill, and then aided the other to a comfortable position.

"What is it, Bill?" he asked, kindly.

"Oh, it lies over yonder in the pines, a white man in Indian paint, and the man that was left behind on the trail to see if they were followed."

The surgeon walked over to the thicket and bent over the form of the man lying there.

"Dead, of course, for Buffalo Bill does not waste powder and lead."

"Yes, he's white and disguised as an Indian; but he's got a horse somewhere, I guess, and the animal will come in handy for Buffalo Bill, so I'll look him up, as I don't wish to remain here long, but seek another camping-place, for I am afraid Cody is more hurt than he admits."

"He's dead, Bill," he said, returning to where the scout sat rubbing his wounded arm and bruised leg.

"Oh, yes, Doc; I knew that."

"Was he mounted?"

"Yes, and his horse cannot be far away."

"I'll look him up, for I wish to get you away from here, to where there is a good camping-place so I can fix you up."

"I guess I'll need it, White Beaver; but look up on the hill yonder for his horse."

This the Surgeon Scout did, mounting his own horse and riding a few hundred yards away.

He soon returned, leading a very fair animal with him, with the saddle, bridle and outfit of the dead outlaw upon him.

"He'll do," said Buffalo Bill, laconically.

"Yes, and I'll soon have him ready for you," and he stripped off the outlaw outfit from the horse and put that of Buffalo Bill in its place.

"Now we'll be off, Bill."

"Guess we better not leave yonder fellow for the wolves, Doc, for he's human."

"You are right, Bill."

"I had forgotten him," and the surgeon hunted up a burying-place for the body.

It was soon found, a crevice in the rocks and earth, loosened with a bowie-knife, and brought in the outlaw's blanket, was thrown upon him.

Then the surgeon aided the scout to mount, and they rode away toward a little stream that came dashing down the hillside, and which Buffalo Bill knew of.

They had hardly reached a good camping-spot, and the surgeon had set to work to dress the wounded arm, when the outlaw's horse neighed.

"Hal! there's some one about, Doc, and if it comes to a fight, I guess I can chip in pretty well," said Buffalo Bill.

"Your old horse, Rocket, and mine are too well trained to neigh in an enemy's company, Bill, and I'll muzzle this fellow, if he has not already been heard by whoever is near."

A blanket was quickly put over the head of the outlaw's horse, and then Surgeon Powell left the pine thicket to reconnoiter.

He was gone but a few minutes when the scout heard him hail some one, and soon after he returned, but not alone.

"Why, it's Night Hawk and Broncho Bill!"

"You are most welcome, pard, for I'm laid up for repairs," cried Buffalo Bill as the two brothers of the surgeon rode into the thicket with him.

"Yes, Bill, the general said Frank was on your trail, and sent us on his, and here we are.

"But are you badly wounded?" cried Night Hawk George Powell as he grasped the hand of his chief, for Buffalo Bill was chief of scouts at the fort.

"Not very bad, I guess; but I got a bullet in my arm, and my horse was killed and fell on my leg and bruised it up; but I'm glad to see you and Broncho, and don't you forget it."

"We saw your dead horse, or rather a white animal we supposed was yours; as the general told us you had left Rocket with his steed in a canyon in the Sioux country."

"Yes, it was the horses or ourselves, so we let the animals go," and Buffalo Bill told what had happened since he and the general had left on their scouting expedition, Surgeon Powell dressing his wounded arm as he talked.

It was decided then that the four should camp where they were for the night, and that Surgeon Powell should return the next day to the fort with the scout, who would be laid up for some days, while Night Hawk and Broncho Bill Powell should go on and see if they could track the Gold Ghouls to their den, or discover what had become of Gaston.

"It is work I had cut out for myself, pard, but if men can do it, you two are the ones, and knowing you are looking up poor Gaston, and hunting for the Ghouls' retreat, I won't feel so bad that I can't do it," said Buffalo Bill.

"If you were not hurt, Bill, we could all four go on together," Surgeon Powell remarked.

But as Buffalo Bill was too badly hurt to do this, the gallant quartette had to divide forces, and the next day, while the chief of scouts and the surgeon started back toward the fort, hoping to meet the cavalry on the way, which the general said he would follow with, Night Hawk and Broncho Bill went on their perilous mission further into the Sioux country.

"There are no two men on the border, Doc, who are better than your brothers on a trail and in a fight, and I don't except ourselves," said Buffalo Bill, earnestly, as they rode back on the trail, after parting with Night Hawk George and Broncho Bill.

CHAPTER XXV.

WELL MET.

WHEN Night Hawk and Broncho Bill went on their way further into the land of the Sioux, after parting from Buffalo Bill and the Surgeon Scout, they well knew all the deadly danger they had to face.

Unerringly they had followed the trail left by their brother, until it had brought them, as has been seen, to a meeting with him and Buffalo Bill.

They had also noted well two other trails, and one of these was evidently made by but one horse.

It was the trail left by the mysterious Maid of the Mountains, and the brothers had studied her horse's tracks well, so as to know them if seen again.

The other was the large trail left by the Indians under Thunder Cloud, who had captured Gaston, the courier.

"George, they'll hardly put poor Gaston to death for a few days, and I move that we try and see if we can concoct some plan to save him," Broncho Bill had said, as they went on their way.

"So say I, Billy, for we can hunt for the den of the Gold Ghouls afterward, and to find that is not so important as to save poor Gaston, if we can do it."

"I know one way I can reach the Sioux village," added George, after a silence of some minutes.

"I think I can guess, George."

"Well, Billy?"

"You intend to play Injun, as you have done before?"

"Yes, you know it don't take much to make me up as an Indian, and I can rig out as a Cheyenne, visit the village at night, as a pretended runner from the Cheyennes, and get the points as to where Gaston is held."

"It's a big risk, George, but you speak the Indian lingo so well you can do it, without doubt, only I hope we can think up some other plan," said Broncho Bill, thoughtfully.

"Well, what shall it be, Billy?"

"You know that single trail?"

"Left by the girl, the general and Buffalo Bill told us of?"

"Yes."

"What then?"

"It was her trail, you know, we saw join Buffalo Bill's down in the valley."

"Yes."

"Let us follow it and try and come up with her."

"What then, Billy?"

"If she helped the general and Bill, why won't she help Gaston?"

"True, if she can."

"Why can't she, for she must be in the Indian village."

"Or the Gold Ghouls' camp."

"Well, if in either, she certainly knows what she is about, and I believe if we came up with her we might get her to help her."

"We can but try."

"I like it better than your going into the Sioux village as a Cheyenne runner."

"Well, let us push on after her and see what we can do."

So they rode on more rapidly and went direct to the spot where the girl had halted Buffalo Bill and turned him back.

They saw that the tracks of her horse proved that from that point she had watched Buffalo Bill, following him evidently, to see if he had really turned back.

Then the trail led on toward the mountains where the Sioux had their village, but in a roundabout way, as though she cared not to meet any Indians that might be prowling about the country between there and the red-skinned haunts.

With the daring for which the two brothers were noted, they pursued the trail directly into the mountains, and, feeling that they were dangerously near the Indian village, they halted to reconnoiter on a rocky ridge that was but a few miles from the lofty range where the camp of Thunder Cloud was.

Hardly had they halted when a large stag came bounding along the ridge and paused near them, though both resisted the temptation to fire on him, great as it was, for they were in need of fresh game.

But the stag had run but a short distance when there came the crack of a rifle, and in full sight of the brothers he dropped dead.

"George, see there!"

"Our girl!"

The words broke from the lips of the two men as they beheld a horsewoman dash up to the fallen stag, dismount and draw her hunting-knife across its throat.

"It must be the mysterious girl, Billy, for she is mounted on a white horse and she looks white herself, even at this distance."

"Yes, there can be no doubt about who she is, so let us go forward and try to speak with her."

"You go, Billy, for I never yet saw a girl afraid of you."

"I'll wait in this hiding-place," Night Hawk said with a smile, adding, as his brother went forward on foot:

"Fascinate her, Billy, so that she cannot run away."

So engaged was the fair huntress, in looking after her game, that she did not notice Broncho Bill until he was within easy pistol-range.

Then her horse saw him and gave a warning snort.

Quick as a flash she was on her guard and her rifle covered the heart of the handsome young scout.

Broncho Bill raised his hands, without wea-

pons, quickly above his head, but uttered no word.

"Who are you?" she cried in a voice that rung with anger.

"A scout from Fort Fearless."

"What are you doing here in the Sioux country?"

"Seeking to save a friend from cruel torture at the hands of the Sioux."

"Where is he?"

"In the Sioux village."

"How do you know?"

"He was taken prisoner by Thunder Cloud and his braves."

"You mean the man who resembles your general?"

"Yes, Gaston the courier."

"Are you alone?"

"My brother is with me."

"Where is he?"

"In yonder thicket."

"Any one else?"

"No."

"You are sure?"

"I would not lie to you, miss."

"I believe you; but you must love your friend dearly to risk your lives in coming here?"

"It is no more than he would do for us."

"You are a brave lot of men at your fort."

"We have no use for cowards there."

"You know Buffalo Bill of course?"

"Yes, we left him at sunrise this morning, for he was wounded in a fight with a renegade white man, and has returned to the fort."

"And the renegade?" she asked quickly.

"Is dead."

"Was Buffalo Bill seriously hurt?"

"A flesh-wound in the arm, and a bruised leg, for his horse was shot and fell upon him."

"How do you expect to get your friend away from the Sioux?"

"To tell you the truth, Buffalo Bill and General Custer told us of you, and we followed your trail, hoping to overtake you, and trusting in your aid."

"What power have I with the Sioux?"

"I do not know, miss, but you certainly have shown that you have power to help those of your own race, for you are no red-skin."

She was silent a moment, as though lost in deep thought.

Then she said:

"You are mounted?"

"Yes, my horse is back in the thicket."

Again she was silent for quite a while, and then she said brusquely:

"I will save your friend's life."

CHAPTER XXVI.

THE FATAL MEETING.

As Henry Vassar went along on his trail, which his two brave daughters were to cross at a given point, to see who it was that was secretly tracking him when he left his home, he failed to see, as he rode along on the hill top, the silent tableau down in the vale, where one man held another silently under the muzzle of his revolver.

Had he seen this strange sight, it would doubtless have changed the situation of affairs somewhat.

But, keen-eyed as he was, and ever on the alert, the settler passed on his way without seeing what was going on in the little glen, in full sight of him, had he happened to glance in that direction.

"Do you mean it, that I have got to fight you?" asked the man who had whispered in the other's ear his secret of why he had been dogging the steps of Henry Vassar.

"I have told you, Cunning Kit, just what I mean."

"You were treacherous to me, and I do not believe what you have just told me about Vassar."

"You only hope to escape by what you have said."

"Before Heaven it is the truth!" and the man was desperately in earnest.

"I do not believe you."

"How can I prove it?"

"I need no proof, for I tell you, Kit, either you or I die right here in this glen."

"You are forcing this upon me."

"I admit it; but I am doing what few men would do in my place."

"What is that?"

"Risking my life in a duel with you, when you are at my mercy and I could shoot you down as you stand."

"That is not your way, I do you that much justice to say so."

"Come, we but lose time, so let this end at once."

"Why will you not give me another chance?"

"I can never trust a traitor, and you would ambush me."

"No, no, I would not do that with you."

"I won't trust you, so let us have it over with."

"There is your revolver, and I will do as I said, give you an equal chance with me."

"You are very kind, for you know your deadly aim," and the man sneered.

"And I know yours, too, and that you are quick as lightning with a weapon."

"I risk my life in giving you half a chance; but I am no murderer, so let you stand on an equal footing with me."

As he spoke he walked off a few paces and placed a revolver upon a stump.

Then he stepped off fifteen feet and placed another weapon on another log, keeping his eye the while upon the man whom he was forcing to fight him, as though he was suspicious that he might dart forward, seize the weapon nearest to him, and shoot him down.

But the man did not move, but stood apart, his face pale, his features working as with pain that was mental.

Having placed the two weapons, the man who was forcing the combat, called out:

"Now, Kit, take your stand yonder, while I remain here where I am."

"We will march, step for step up to our weapons, seize them and open fire, and, as I said before, let the best man win the deadly game."

"Are you ready?"

"If you must have it so."

"I will have it so."

"Then I am ready, but this is murder."

"Who is the murderer, Kit?"

"You are."

"Oh, no, for it is a fair chance between us."

"I do not feel it so."

"How can I act more fairly, Kit?"

"Let me go."

"Not I, so come, take your stand."

The man sighed and walked to the spot indicated by the other.

His face was livid, but he seemed to have nervously for the ordeal, come what might.

Then in the coolest manner possible came the words:

"Are you ready, Kit?"

"I am; but I call it murder."

"Then kill me, so I won't have your life to answer for," was the bitter reply.

The man made no reply, and then came clear and distinct:

"Forward, march!"

They both stepped off briskly at the word, each man with his eye on the other, and at about the same speed.

They reached their weapons at the same moment, grasped them together, and in an instant they were at a level and flashed as one weapon.

One man dropped dead in his tracks.

The other remained erect, gazing at the result of his deadly aim.

"He was treacherous, so his fate was deserved," he said coolly, and after a short while he turned away, mounted his horse and rode up the hillside.

Suddenly he drew rein, for he saw that there were others near him.

Had they seen the affair in the glen?

No, they had just ridden up, though the shots had evidently brought them there.

They were the Border Belles, and they had been following out their plan, to cross their father's trail at that point and see who it was that dogged his steps.

They had heard the shots, and their practiced ears had told them that there were two reports mingling together.

Believing their father in danger, Ruby had cried to Pearl to come on, and they had dashed forward at full speed, to suddenly see the horseman coming slowly up the hill.

They knew that elegant form and handsome face at a glance, and his quiet manner served to reassure them.

As he drew near he raised his sombrero and bowed low, while he said, pleasantly:

"Good-morning, young ladies; are you out for a gallop, or on a hunt?"

"We are hunting just now, Mr. Golden, for the cause of those two shots we heard a few minutes ago, for we feared our father, who has gone this way, had been ambushed," said Ruby.

"I fired one of the shots, Miss Ruby," was the quiet reply.

"And father?" was the quick response.

"He passed over the hill here a quarter of an hour ago."

"And the other shot, Mr. Golden?" asked Pearl.

"Was fired by a man down yonder in the glen."

"At whom?"

"At me."

"Pray tell us what it all means, Mr. Golden?" Ruby said, impatiently.

He smiled pleasantly and replied:

"It simply means, Miss Ruby, that I saw a man dogging your father's footsteps, and calling him to an account for it, we had some words and I killed him."

CHAPTER XXVII.

A BOLD RESCUE.

WHEN the mysterious maiden, who kept so thoroughly to herself who she was, and why she was wandering around in the Sioux country, said to Broncho Bill that she would help him rescue Gaston, the courier, the handsome young scout thanked her warmly.

"I do not deserve thanks for doing my duty, for I would feel sorry, indeed, were your friend to die when I could save him and did not," she said, quietly.

"May I ask what your plan is?" Broncho Bill asked.

"I do not know; but I will save him," was the response.

"Will you let me call my brother, or will you go to him?"

"There is no need, for I go to the village at once."

"Are you a captive there, and yet you cannot be, with the freedom you have?"

"I cannot tell what I am; but do you see yonder cliff?" and she pointed across the valley to the mountain-side.

"Yes."

"At the base of that cliff a trail leads up to the mountain-top."

"It goes between two rocks, and you cannot miss it."

"The Indians seldom use it, and never after dark, for they believe that spirits from the happy hunting-grounds follow the trail by night."

"After dark seek the cliff, follow the trail, and it will lead you to the mountain-top."

"You will see, upon reaching the mountain-top an old Medicine Lodge, so wait there till I come, and do not be surprised if you see one you believe to be other than me."

"Do you understand?"

"I am to bring my brother with me?"

"Yes."

"And come mounted?"

"Certainly, but muffle the hoofs of your horses, so as to make no sound in ascending the trail, and also keep them back among the rocks when you reach the top."

"I will do as you say in all things."

"I will be there, and you shall see that I keep my word to free your friend."

"Good-by."

She motioned to him to leave her, and Broncho Bill obeyed her wish, at once walking back to rejoin his brother.

When he reached the thicket where Night Hawk awaited him, the maiden had already lifted the stag to the back of her horse, exhibiting in so doing a strength that was wonderful, and had gone away down the hillside.

"Well, Billy, I told you she would not run from you," said Night Hawk, with a smile.

"George, she's a beauty."

"I judged so, from the time you stayed."

"She's as lovely in her face and form as any city girl I ever met; but who is she?"

"That's what I thought you went to find out, Billy."

"No, I went to try and get her aid in rescuing Gaston."

"And will she?"

"She will, for a fact, and I'll tell you just what we have to do."

"Which means nothing," said Night Hawk George, after Broncho Bill had told his plan, or rather that of the strange maiden.

"That's about so; she does it all, George."

"Yes, if she don't do more."

"How's that?"

"Get us caught in a trap."

"Now, George, don't be suspicious of that girl, for think how she saved the general and Buffalo Bill."

"You are right, Billy; but who the mischief is she?"

"I don't know."

"Do you know her name?"

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through crevices, around boulders and upon the very verge of precipices; but the two daring scouts did not flinch from the danger before them, and, having muffed the hoofs of their horses with pieces of a blanket, they held on their way.

The top was at last reached and the horses were made fast, while the brothers went to the spot where the maiden was to meet them, the old Medicine Lodge she had spoken of.

All was silent there, and Night Hawk George said:

"This is a spooky-looking place, Billy."

"Yes; she said the red-skins thought the spirits from the happy hunting-grounds came here at night; but I'd rather meet a ghost now than a Sioux."

"So would I; but yonder comes some one."

A dark form was visible coming through the darkness, and the two scouts stepped into the shadow of the old Medicine Lodge and waited, their revolvers in hand.

"It is the girl, George, or a squaw, at least," whispered Broncho Bill.

Night Hawk made no reply, and the form came to a halt not far away.

Then came the words, spoken in a low tone:

"Broncho Bill?"

"Well, I am here; but how did you know my name?"

And the scout stepped toward the one who had called him, to suddenly start back as he beheld a form robed in the dress of a nun.

"Are you not the one I met to-day?" he asked.

"It matters not, so I can serve you, sir."

"But you know me, for you called my name, or at least the one my pards call me by."

"You are here to free your friend, Gaston, the courier?"

"Yes; and my brother, Night Hawk George Powell is with me, as you see."

She bowed, and Night Hawk doffed his sombrero gallantly.

"You will have to take more than the courier."

"Ha! you will go with us, then?"

"No."

"Who, then?"

"A Sioux."

"I do not understand you."

"The courier is guarded in the Medicine Lodge, near the tepee of old Panther Eye."

"There is a Sioux brave guarding him, and I will lead the brave here, you must spring upon him and bind him."

"Let him utter no cry, and do not yourselves speak a word."

"See! I have brought you Indian costumes to put on, and the brave must regard you as spirits."

"You are to tell the courier that you are not to speak to him, and you must carry the brave with you until nearly dawn."

"Then release him without a word and point back toward his village."

"I wish the Indians to believe that the spirits from the happy hunting-grounds freed the courier."

"Do you understand?"

"Yes, miss."

"I do, perfectly."

"You will need horses for your friend and for the Indian."

"I will get them and lead them to where your horses are."

"Then await me here, for I will come with the Indian guard and you must seize him."

"We will do as you say, miss," Night Hawk George said.

"You must not hurt the warrior, only gag and bind him, then strap him to the back of one of the horses I bring, blindfolding him, also."

"Then I will bring your friend, and you must have many a mile between you and Thunder Cloud's village when the sun rises."

"We will, miss," said Broncho Bill.

The nun-robed form then turned and glided away, and how cleverly Gaston, the courier, was rescued by her has been already seen, and glad at their success the two brothers started on the back trail, the happy Gaston with them, and the red-skin guard blindfolded, gagged, bound and tied to the back of an Indian pony, believing that spirit warriors were carrying him off."

As dawn approached, and they halted to free the Indian, the courier called Night Hawk aside and said in a whisper, when he knew the brave was to be released:

"Better kill the red rascal, instead of letting him go."

"No, the girl asked us to set him free, and we will do so," replied Night Hawk, and soon after the red-skin was left alone, standing on foot in the trail, while the scouts, leading his horse, rode away from him in silence, like shadow warriors, as he deemed them.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

THE "SPIRIT BRAVES."

WHEN morning came in the village of Thunder Cloud, there was consternation among the red inhabitants.

The prisoner was gone!

There was no denying this fact, and the Indians were in the wildest rage.

The brave, Owl Eyes, the most trusted of all the young warriors of the tribe, and one who was noted for his sleeplessness, had also disappeared.

Strange to say, not even the old seer, Panther Eye, could solve the mystery.

He had heard no sound during the night, and it was known that, old as he was, he slept like a watch-dog.

There were too many beaten paths and tracks through the village to attempt to trail the prisoner or his guard.

The fact the red-skins alone knew, that the man they believed to be General Custer and his guard had mysteriously disappeared.

If he had killed Owl Eyes, the body would be there as proof.

But there was no body of a departed brave, and this added to the mystery.

The very best scouts and trailers of the tribe were put upon the mystery, to solve it, but without result.

Mounted warriors were sent off on the different trails leading from the village, and one party discovered the tracks of two unshod ponies leading around from the cliff path, which was so dangerous as to be almost considered impassable.

The tracks were fresh, and so the party of braves followed them across the valley.

They had gone but half a dozen miles when they beheld a form approaching.

It was Owl Eyes, he was on foot and coming along at a swinging trot.

He came to a halt as he met his comrades, and seeing that every eye was upon him for an explanation, he at once told his story of how the Spirit Nun had come and led him from the Medicine Lodge into the timber.

There two spirit braves had sprung upon him, tied and gagged him and placed him upon a pony, which was led down the haunted cliff trail.

Through the night he had ridden, blindfolded, gagged and bound, until at last the spirit warriors came to a halt and he was released.

Not a word had been spoken all the time, but when he was set free he beheld there the prisoner, the great yellow-haired chief of the pale-faces.

He had said to him:

"See, Owl Eyes, the Great Spirit meant not that your people were to kill me, so he sent his spirit braves to set me free."

"Go back to your people and tell them."

Owl Eyes said that he saw the spirit braves, yet knew them not in the darkness.

Their horses had left no trail, but his horse and that of the white chief had left a trail, and so the other animals were shadow horses, he thought; but he had not seen the muffled hoofs of the steeds ridden by Night Hawk and Broncho Bill, which accounted for their leaving no tracks with their iron-shod hoofs.

The party of warriors heard the strange story of Owl Eyes with deep interest.

Then runners were sent on the other trails to bring back the pursuing bands, and Owl Eyes was escorted back to the village, where he told his strange story to Panther Eyes and Thunder Cloud.

Not a red-skin doubted the story, and all felt that the Great Spirit meant not that the yellow-haired chief should die by their hands, and it impressed them deeply and unpleasantly, for they greatly wanted the scalp of Custer, for they still believed Gaston, the courier, to be the famous cavalry chieftain.

The fact that the Spirit Nun had come to the village and had brought with her braves from the Shadow Land, made old Panther Eyes shake in his moccasins, and his son, Thunder Cloud, was also well frightened, though he was not so superstitious as his father, and had a more practical way of looking at things.

He did not wholly believe the ghostly aid rendered to the prisoner, and felt that there was some earthly agency in the matter.

Still, he could never account for the appearance of the Spirit Nun, and if the braves who aided her were not spirits, there were traitors in his camp, among his people, and this made him feel very uncomfortable.

Had almost any other warrior than Owl Eyes been on guard, Thunder Cloud would have doubted him.

But Owl Eyes was too brave a warrior, too ambitious to rise to the rank of chief, to even do one act that would destroy his prospects.

"I will see my friend, the chief of the Gold Soldiers," he muttered to himself, referring to Clint Carl the outlaw leader of the Gold Ghouls.

"His tongue tells me straight," he added.

Having decided upon this course, Thunder Cloud rigged himself up in his best costume, mounted his finest horse, and rode out of the village upon his visit to Clint Carl, the chief of the Gold Ghouls of the Overland trails.

CHAPTER XXIX.

A TALE OF LOVE.

WHEN Gabriel told the Border Belles that he had simply shot a man, whom he had

caught dogging their father's tracks, Ruby and Pearl looked at each other in a significant manner, and the latter said:

"Shall we tell Mr. Golden, Pearl?"

"I guess so, for he has certainly gotten rid of one whom we wished to find," was the answer.

"You were seeking for some one then?" asked Golden.

"Well, yes; but I'll leave Ruby here with you, Mr. Golden, while I ride on after father and fetch him back," Pearl said.

Then she dashed away, leaving Ruby with the young ranchman.

"You have something then to tell me, Miss Ruby?" asked Golden.

"Yes, I think you should know, as you have rid us of an enemy."

"I too have something to tell you, Miss Ruby; but let me hear your story first," he said, gazing with admiration up into her beautiful face, for he had dismounted and stood by the side of her horse.

"There is little to tell, Mr. Golden, other than that father told us last night that he had been dogged of late by some one, he knew not who, when he went out hunting, and also, when looking for his cattle that had strayed."

"Your father, I thought, allowed you and Miss Pearl to do the hunting?"

"So he does; but of late he too has taken a fancy to going out himself almost daily, though he seldom gets much game."

"I see, and upon such occasions he has been followed, you say?"

"Yes."

"But could not find out who it was who trailed him?"

"No, and last night he found some one at the cabin when he went out."

"The man had brought fresh game with him, coaxed the dogs into the barn with it, and there shut them up."

"Father saw him run as he went out of the door, but though he fired at him, he did not seem to hit him."

"This was strange."

"That he missed him?" asked Ruby, with a smile.

"Oh, no; that he should have found a man around his place at night."

"Yes, and we determined to find out who it was; so Pearl and myself told father that we would start soon after he left home this morning, cross his trail at a given point and follow it, hoping thus to come up with the man who was dogging him."

"You are brave young ladies, Miss Ruby, you and your sweet sister; but what would you have done with the man had you caught him on your father's trail?"

"Made him a prisoner, or killed him," was the cool response, while she added:

"He could but be an intended assassin, and such a man should receive no more mercy than he would show."

"You are right, and so it was that I acted."

"We heard your shots, and so came here, fearing our father was in danger."

"Fortunately he was not; but you have told me what you had to tell, Miss Ruby, and now I will let you know my secret."

"You have a secret, then?"

"Yes, and one which I wish to be a secret no longer; it is that I love you, Ruby, love you with my whole heart and soul, and I ask you to tell me that my love is returned and that some day you will make me the happiest man on earth by becoming my wife."

"Will you not, Ruby?"

"His fine eyes gazed earnestly into hers, and he noted the start and look of surprise she gave."

"Why, Mr. Golden, is not this rather sudden?" she asked.

"I have loved you since I first saw you, Ruby."

"That was nearly a year ago, and we have not met a dozen times."

"One time was enough for my heart to be won by you, Ruby."

"I really thought it was Pearl that you cared for."

"I like Miss Pearl, I could love her as a sister; but you I wish to be my wife."

"I guess you'll have to have it *vice versa*, Mr. Golden, if you wish to marry into our family; that is, love me as a sister and Pearl as a wife."

"Can you mean this?" he eagerly asked.

"Indeed I do, for though I do not know just how Pearl feels toward you, I can say for myself that I think you would make a jolly good brother, but an awful poor lover."

"Ruby."

"It is a fact, for you have loved other maidens in the settlement, I have heard, and then, you are good-looking for a husband, for half the girls would be falling in love with you, and that wouldn't do for my husband."

"No, Mr. Golden, try Pearl, and if she refuses you, why, there is just as good game on the prairies as has ever been snared."

"You are cruel."

"No, sincere; but here come father and Pearl now."

The settler and his daughter now came into view, riding at a rapid gallop, and the ranchero greeted them in his quiet, easy manner, as

though nothing had happened to mar the even tenor of his ways.

"So you shot a man who was dogging my trail, Golden?" asked the settler.

"Yes, sir."

"Did you kill him?"

"Oh, yes, Mr. Vassar. I do not believe in wasting powder and lead."

"But he fired, too, for Pearl said there were two shots, though so close together that they seemed like one report."

"Yes, he fired, too."

"Tell me of it."

"I was riding along and saw him following a trail."

"I watched him, and my horse neighing startled him, and he ran, as soon as he saw me."

"Was he mounted?"

"No, on foot, and I gave chase."

"He turned in the timber down yonder, and showed fight."

"I asked him whose trail he was on, and he replied:

"Henry Vassar's."

"I then asked him a few other questions, and it led to an exchange of shots between us."

"I was an instant too quick for him, and so I live to tell you of it."

"Come, let us go there and see if you recognize him."

The young ranchero told his story in a quiet way, and mounting, led the way down into the valley where the man, Cunning Kit, lay.

"He is dead; but I do not know him," said the settler, while Ruby and Pearl gazed upon the form of the dead man with awe.

"You cannot, then, understand any motive he had in following you?"

"No; but I will go to the house, get a spade and bury him."

"I will go and bring it to you, father, for see, these wolves will devour him if you leave him unguarded," said Pearl.

"And as I must go on my way to the fort, Miss Pearl, I will ride that far with you," Gabriel Golden said, and they rode off together, leaving Ruby with her father, who was trying to see if he could discover by searching his clothing, who the dead man was.

CHAPTER XXX.

THE TWO CHIEFS.

WHEN Thunder Cloud rode away from his village he went alone.

He had no cause to fear a foe in the Sioux country, for no large force of cavalry could penetrate there without his trusty red-skin scouts, who were kept upon the neutral ground, as it were, giving him notice.

Then too he had a firm ally in Clint Carl, who, a white man, had spies that reported to him the movements of the cavalry from the fort, and word was quickly sent to the Indian village.

So without dread Thunder Cloud wended his way to the retreat of the outlaw leader.

This retreat was the main one of the Gold Ghouls, for there they had the protection of being in the Sioux country, where nothing but a very large force of soldiers dare pursue them, and Clint Carl was well posted as to the complement of men along the frontier and knew that General Custer could not bring troops enough together to dare invade far into Thunder Cloud's domain.

Clint Carl had other "stations," as he called them, along the Overland trails, which ran from the mining country and settlements back to important points Eastward.

In these stations several men were constantly kept, and watching their chances, they would bring a stage-coach to a halt, rob the passengers, and sometimes get a rich haul.

Pursued, they would scatter to the camps and play honest miners or settlers, or hide in their retreats where it was impossible to find them without a large force.

But his "supply camp," and "booty den," was up in the Sioux country, and here a force of over a score of men Clint Carl kept constantly on hand.

It was to this camp the Indian chief wended his way, and to reach it was no easy task.

In fact, without having been once over the trail a good scout could never find it from being directed there.

Back in the very fastnesses of a rugged range of mountains the camp was located, upon the shores of a body of water hidden away in a mass of canyons where no one would suspect that man could find an abiding-place.

Over rocky plateaus that left no trail, through streams of water that swept away all tracks, the Indian chief made his way until at last he passed around a rocky shelf which made even his stout heart tremble as he glanced down into the surging waters of a torrent a hundred feet below, and knew that a false step of his horse would hurl him to death.

The pony seemed also to fully understand his deadly peril, and, pressing hard against the precipice on his right, which towered far above him, went slowly along the narrow shelf that comprised the trail.

Passing this in safety, the Sioux chief held on his way along the mountain ridge and soon after

descended into the valley where was the camp of the outlaws.

As he did so he heard the clatter of hoofs behind him, and turning quickly beheld the object of his search, Carl Clint himself.

The outlaw was splendidly mounted, riding a blood bay mare, and his saddle and bridle were of the finest make.

He was dressed in a pair of buckskin leggings, stuck in top boots, wore a black corduroy blouse, a gray sombrero, and was armed with a rifle and revolvers of the latest pattern and finest make.

His form was the perfection of symmetry and strength, and his face was heavily bearded and hair worn long, resting upon his broad shoulders.

Excepting his eyes and nose, not a feature of his face was visible, so heavy were his beard and hair, while his sombrero was pulled down over his forehead to his brows.

"Ho, chief, going to see me?" he called out, in a rich, deep voice, and Thunder Cloud replied in good English:

"Yes, my heart is troubled, and I have come to talk with my white brother."

"You are in luck to find me, for I am not often here, but circulate from place to place."

"Come, we will go to camp, have some supper and talk over matters, for things don't seem to be making just right of late; Custer is too energetic and vicious in his blows, Buffalo Bill is trying to get us into a trap, and I learn that the Powell brothers, Night Hawk George and Broncho Bill, have taken to trailing us down, and certain it is that one of my men, left on picket duty, was killed by some of the fort's outs."

"Trouble with me, too, chief," said Thunder Cloud, and as they rode on to camp he told of the bold invading of his country by General Custer and Buffalo Bill, their escape from the trap he got them into, his following of Custer and capture of Gaston, whom he supposed to be the general, and his escape through the agency of the Spirit Nun and braves.

They had now reached the camp of the Gold Ghouls, a point of land jutting out into the lake, with deep water on either side, and shallow enough across the sheet of water from the point to wade through to the other side, thus forming a safe retreat.

The point was rugged, and a natural fortification, and the score of wild, lawless men dwelling there had made themselves quite comfortable in their retreat.

The Gold Ghoul chief had once saved Thunder Cloud from being burned at the stake by the Pawnees, and several times had warned the Sioux chief of an intended attack upon his village.

This accounted for the friendship between the two, and Thunder Cloud was very willing to have so brave an ally find refuge in his country, especially as he and his braves were wont to receive many presents for their protection of them.

Arriving at the log hut that the chief made his quarters when at his retreat, Clint Carl was greeted respectfully by his men, for he commanded his outlaw band with an iron hand, and calling to a negro to get supper after staking out his and his red guest's horses, he led the way into the cabin.

Hardly had he done so, when a horseman came at a gallop along the point and dismounted at the door of the cabin.

The horseman was Burton Segus, the deserter.

CHAPTER XXXI.

THE PLOT AGAINST CUSTER.

"WELL, Segus, you look the worse for wear.

"What has happened to you?" and Clint Carl turned to the deserter and gazed fixedly at him.

His head was bound up on account of the wound received at the hands of the mysterious maiden, just as he thought he had Custer at his mercy, and his face was haggard and tired-looking.

"I've had a hard time, chief," was the reply.

"You look it; but what has happened, for I supposed you were on the lower trail, where I told you to go."

"I went there, Captain Carl, but found you had come here, so followed you."

"Well?"

"I did not kill General Custer."

"So I know, as the chief here, Thunder Cloud, captured him and carried him to his village."

"Ha! when was this?" and the deserter gazed earnestly at the Indian chief, who told the circumstance of his having captured, as he believed, the yellow-haired chief.

"Thunder Cloud, you are wrong; that was not General Custer," said the deserter.

"No, you are wrong, Segus, for the chief knows the general well."

"No, Captain Carl, it was Gaston, the scout, whom the chief captured, and he is almost the image of General Custer, and prides himself upon it greatly, imitating him in many ways."

"I have heard of this man before, now I re-

member, Segus; but are you sure it was not General Custer that the chief caught?"

"I know it, Captain Carl, for I saw the chief here ride off with his captive, and soon after General Custer came along and I ambushed him."

"Ha! killed him?"

"No, sir, I did not; but he rode directly upon me, and I had the drop upon him."

"But somebody, who, I know not, had the drop on me, and this wound on my head knocked me silly, for I was fired on, just as I was about to pull trigger."

"General Custer evidently supposed I was dead, for he rode on, and the one who fired on me did not come to see the result, for I came to consciousness lying just as I had fallen."

"I searched about for trails, and saw the general's going on toward the fort, and another trail that was left by the one who shot me."

"It led away from the hills and across the prairies."

"Fearing that General Custer would send those wild Powells out to bury me, I hastened on my way, and went to the lower trail, captain, as you ordered me."

"The boys there had made a rich haul, capturing a treasure-box on a coach, and so I said I would look you up and tell you, so in spite of my severe wound I have been constantly on the go."

"You have done well, Segus; but who could it have been who fired at you?"

"I do not know, captain; wish I did."

"And the lower trail squad have done well, you say?"

"Yes, sir, they got a box of dust being sent over from the mines."

"This is good news; but something else than wishing to tell me this brought you here?"

"Well, I confess it, sir."

"Out with it, Segus."

"Well, captain, I fear I won't be much account until I get my revenge, and I was going to ask you to give me a leave for a few weeks that I might dog General Custer's track and kill him."

"All right, Segus, I want him out of the way, for he is too busy a man to suit me, and will drive us off the trails if we don't mind."

"Thank you, sir, and I will start out tomorrow," and the deserter left the cabin to join the men at their supper, leaving the chief and Captain Carl to discuss another little plot to get rid of General Custer and Buffalo Bill at the same time.

This plot the conversation of the red and white chiefs will make known.

"I tell you, Thunder Cloud, Segus may or may not kill Custer; but I have a plan to capture him," said Captain Carl.

"Let my white brother speak," replied Thunder Cloud.

"You know the Meeting Rock in the prairie, some twenty miles from the old fort?"

"Me knows."

"There are cavities in that rock where a dozen men and horses can hide."

"Yes."

"I will go there the night before with eight of my men, and hide there, and you can send a runner to the fort, asking General Custer to meet you, as you wish to make peace with him at once."

"Tell him to come with Buffalo Bill to the rock, while his escort can remain on the hill, two miles from the rock, across the prairie, and you and one of your chiefs will meet him, your warriors remaining back at the river a like distance off with the soldiers."

"As the whole prairie, from the hills to the river, four miles and more, can be seen, he will suspect no trap, and when he rides out with the scout, you can leave the river timber with one of your chiefs."

"I will already be concealed in the rocks, with my men, and dash out and capture both General Custer and Buffalo Bill."

"If they get too hot for us, we can kill them."

"Good! much very good!" cried the red-skin with delight.

"You agree then?"

"We do as white brother says."

"Then we will say the third night from this I go to the Meeting Rock and hide, and the next day you appoint for the meeting with the general."

"Say at five o'clock in the afternoon, so night won't be far away."

"When will you send your messenger to the post?"

"We go back to-morrow, send him right off."

And so the treacherous plots were arranged by the outlaw and the Sioux.

CHAPTER XXXII.

THE SHADOW.

WHEN Buffalo Bill and Surgeon Powell parted company with Night Hawk George and Broncho Bill, they held on their way back toward the fort.

Remembering that the general had said he would follow with a force of cavalrymen, to support Buffalo, himself and brothers, Surgeon Powell said:

"I guess we'll run upon the general and his squadron, Bill, before we get very far."

"It will be wrong if the general attempts to invade the Sioux country with a hundred soldiers, for that cunning chief Thunder Cloud can throw a thousand warriors against him," said Buffalo Bill.

"That is true, and they will be desperate, too, if they think General Custer is trying to strike their village."

"We have not five hundred fighting men for our long line of border to protect, and we should have ten times as many, for our weakness keeps the red-skinned on the war-path," Surgeon Powell said.

Toward sunset, as they were riding slowly along, for Buffalo Bill was suffering from his wound and bruised leg, and could not ride fast, they came to a rise where a long view ahead could be obtained.

"Bravo, Bill! there come our boys in blue," cried Frank Powell.

"Yes, there they are, and the general has fully a hundred with him, for see, he is riding ahead."

It was but a short while before the scout and the surgeon were seen by General Custer, and he took off his hat and waved it.

"Hello, Cody, you look as though you were laid up for repairs," cried the general, as he drew near and saw the arm of the scout in a sling, and that his face showed suffering.

"Yes, sir; I'm used up for a few days with a flesh-wound and a bruised leg, for my horse fell upon me."

"Your Red Tomahawk animal?"

"Yes, sir."

"He was killed, then?"

"Yes, sir."

"And I left mine at the fort; but is Cody much hurt, Powell?"

"He will have to lay by for perhaps two weeks, sir, though his injuries are not dangerous."

"I am glad to hear that; but where are your brothers?"

"In the Sioux country, sir, for they went on to try and help Gaston out of the hands of the red Philistines, and also to look up the retreat of the Gold Ghouls."

"They'll do both if it is to be done, only I hope they won't get into trouble," said General Custer.

"Trust George and Frank for getting out of it if they do, general," said Surgeon Powell, who knew his brothers too well to dread that harm would befall them, perilous as was the work they had cut out to perform.

Then General Custer learned how his intended murderer, Segus, the deserter, had not been killed, and what had happened to Buffalo Bill since parting with him.

"You were right, then, Bill, for they were Gold Ghouls and not red-skinned?"

"Yes, general."

"And what a bold game they played to kidnap Vassar's daughters."

"I tell you, those fellows must all be hanged, and we must hit the Sioux so hard they won't dare to leave their country."

"You have so small a force, general, that it will be hard to catch the Gold Ghouls, who take refuge in the Sioux country, or to follow up the red-skinned hotly," said Buffalo Bill.

"By Jove, you are right, Cody, and I keep forgetting that the Government expects one soldier to fight and whip ten Indians."

"Still, I will show strength by going into camp here on the border of the settlement with what men I have, and send back to the fort for tents and supplies, for if Thunder Cloud intends to strike the settlement we will be on hand to receive him; but, really, I am most anxious about Night Hawk and Broncho Bill."

"Don't feel anxiety on their account, general," said Buffalo Bill, "for if any two men on this border can give the red-skinned big odds and at the same time take care to come out with flying colors, those two are Night Hawk and Broncho Powell."

"I know, Bill; but they have gone on a most desperate undertaking in the attempt to rescue Gaston."

"I'll bet they do it though, if he's alive," said Surgeon Powell, quietly.

"I only hope so, for his sake and theirs; but let us find a good place and make our camp, and, Cody, you can go on to the fort with the party I send there after tents and supplies."

"I would rather remain in camp with you, general."

"Certainly, if you wish, for I would like to have you, as your advice will be good if you are not in fighting trim."

A fine spot for camping was found, and the troopers set to work to make it as comfortable as possible, as they expected they would remain there for some little time.

A courier was sent back to the fort, for all that was needed, and others were dispatched to the settlements to tell the settlers to be on the watch for red-skin raids and that a camp of soldiers had been established some fifteen miles nearer to them than was Fort Fearless.

The supply-train arrived in good time, tents were pitched, guards were set, and several

scouts were sent off toward the Sioux country to reconnoiter, but with orders not to go over the line into the red-skin territory, only to watch for any movements that might be intended by Thunder Cloud and his braves.

The second day after the establishment of the camp a horseman was seen approaching across the prairie.

He came on at a steady pace, and, as he drew near and was recognized, a loud cheer went up from the soldiers.

"It is Gaston the courier, general," cried Captain Taylor, who had half of his company of cavalry in the camp, going up to the quarters of the general, as soon as the courier was recognized.

All was excitement now among the soldiers, for Gaston had escaped, that was certain, and the query ran around as to where were Night Hawk George and Broncho Bill, who had gone to his rescue?

As Gaston rode into camp he was greeted with a shout of welcome.

Raising his hat in response, he rode up to General Custer's tent and dismounted.

The general, Buffalo Bill, who was lying upon a blanket, Surgeon Powell and Captain Taylor were there and gave him a hearty greeting.

"Sit down, Gaston, for you look tired, and tell us where Night Hawk and Broncho Bill are if you have seen them?"

"They are all right, general, and I guess I have seen them, for I owe my escape to those two daring brothers of yours, Surgeon Powell," said Gaston with enthusiastic warmth.

"Tell us all about it, Gaston, for I know it's a story worth hearing, for you look it, as those blonde locks of yours haven't been attended to of late, I guess," said the general, who was often won't to joke the courier-scout upon his blonde hair, so much like his own.

"No, sir, for the first things the red-skinned stoole was my comb and my looking glass."

"I see you have your weapons."

"Oh, yes, sir, I got all back with my freedom, and I'll tell you how it was."

The courier then told how he was captured and carried off to the Sioux village, and that he had given up all all hope, when suddenly a form glided into the Medicine Lodge, cut his bonds and told him to follow her.

He did so, and the starlight had shown him that she was dressed like a nun.

"A nun, Gaston?"

"Yes, general."

"Who was she?"

"I do not know, sir; but she had already led the red-skin guard who was over me, into the timber, where Night Hawk and Broncho Bill, in full Indian rig and war-paint, quickly had him choked, bound, gagged and blindfolded.

"They whispered to me to utter no word, until they said I could, and I obeyed."

"Then the red-skin was tied upon a pony, I was given another, and we started down a trail, around precipices that I would not risk again for a fortune."

"But the nun, Gaston?"

"She uttered no word, sir, after bidding me follow her, and I saw her no more after meeting with the Powell pards."

"Did they make no explanation to you?"

"They told me, after we got rid of the Indians."

"What did you do with him?"

"Turned him loose, as the nun asked him to do, before daylight."

"Well?"

"They told me the nun was a girl that had helped you and Bill, and they called her your Shadow."

"She certainly has shadowed me, and for my good; but where did they see her?"

"They went to the foot-hills in sight of the mountains where the Sioux camp is, and met her out hunting."

"Broncho Bill tried his good looks and winning ways on her, and she promised to help them and told them where to come that night."

"They came by a trail they risked their lives to take, the girl met them, and she was in the dress of a nun, and she led the guard, Owl Eyes, one of the dandy Indians of the tribe, right into the hands of the Powells, and then went back after me."

"That is all I know, sir, and I doubt if Night Hawk and Broncho Bill can tell you any more about her."

"She is the most mysterious creature I ever heard of; but what her object was to masquerade as a nun in an Indian camp, I cannot understand," General Custer said.

"I wonder if she cannot be a Sister of Charity who has given up her life in trying to convert the Sioux by living among them?" said Gaston.

"She will have a gigantic task to perform," muttered Frank Powell.

"General, I remember that several years ago a nun was captured with a wagon-train with which she and others were going into New Mexico, and nothing was ever heard of her again and she was given up as dead."

"I wonder if this mysterious Maiden of the Mountains can be that nun?" said Buffalo Bill.

"You have doubtless hit it, Cody; but why

on earth was she not willing to leave the wretches when she had a chance to do so with us?"

This question no one could answer, and General Custer's mysterious "Shadow" was discussed until a late hour that night, as also was the daring of Night Hawk George and Broncho Bill, who had, Gaston said, told him to come on to the fort and urge the general not to invade the Sioux country until he heard from them; but what they intended doing the courier did not know, but said:

"They've got some bold game to play, you may all be certain."

CHAPTER XXXIII.

A MYSTERIOUS PURSUER.

THE next morning after the arrival of Gaston, the courier, in the temporary encampment of General Custer and his troopers, that officer mounted his horse and rode down the valley toward the settlement.

It was his wish to personally see several of the more prominent settlers and urge upon them to organize a band of rangers among themselves, who might be most serviceable in case of an attack on the settlement, and also guard it if he called off all his troops on a raid into the Indian country among the Sioux villages.

He had not ordered an escort to accompany him, and had refused the offer of several officers to accompany him, as they thought that he should not go alone.

But General Custer was a man with a great deal of confidence in himself, and fear was a word not to be found in his vocabulary.

He reached the settlement without meeting any one, the ranch of Gabriel Golden being the first one he visited.

That handsome young ranchero was seated upon his rustic piazza, and went to meet the general as he rode up, extending to him a cordial welcome.

There was that about the young man which the general admired, and yet, from some reason he could not wholly like him, though why he did not know.

He made known his wishes to the ranchero, and it received his hearty support, to raise a band of rangers among the settlers.

"There can be raised, within the distance of fifty miles, a hundred good men, I should think, general, and I will do all I can to get them together," said Gabriel Golden, and the general left, feeling that he had a strong ally at least in the work.

He then visited several other rancheros, and brought up at Sunset Ranch on his way back to his camp.

Henry Vassar had just come in from a hunt, so the general was in time to join him in a late dinner, and a good one it was, Ruby and Pearl doing their best to entertain most hospitably their distinguished guest.

"I suppose you heard from Golden of his killing the man who has been dogging my steps when I went out of late, general?" said Henry Vassar.

"No, indeed, he said nothing to me of such an occurrence."

"You surprise me, general; what a strange man he is not to speak of an event of such importance."

"In fact, I supposed that he went to the fort and reported it to you, or I should have done so," and Henry Vassar told of the affair as he knew it.

The general was silent for a moment, as though in deep thought, and then he said:

"Golden is a strange man, Mr. Vassar, for he has all the dignity of a man twice his years, he is as courtly as a Chesterfield and handsome as a picture, and I have an idea that he has a history behind him."

"In fact, he is no ordinary man by any means, and to kill the fellow as you say and then consider it of too little importance to speak of it, shows that he is not a stranger to wild scenes; but here, it is getting toward sunset, and I must be off, or I'll have the whole camp coming to look me up, for my men seem to be very uneasy about me of late."

Bidding adieu to the hospitable settler and his pretty daughters, the general mounted his horse and started at a brisk pace for his camp, some miles distant.

He had been gone but a short while when the settler and his daughters, who were seated upon the little porch, the former enjoying his pipe, heard the rapid clatter of hoofs.

In another moment there dashed into view through the timber a horse and rider.

"Father, it is a girl on horseback," said Pearl.

"Who can he be?" cried Ruby.

A few moments more and the rider was up to the rail fence that encircled the settler's well-kept yard.

But without drawing rein she went with a flying leap over the bars that stood duty as a gate, and drew up before the piazza.

Instinctively the settler, Ruby and Pearl arose as she came to a halt.

The strange beauty of the visitor seemed to command it, and her appearance and costume was even more striking.

It was the mysterious Maid of the Mountains, and she was mounted upon her snow-white horse, upon whose neck was the brand of the Red Tomahawk.

In her semi-savage but brilliant costume, she was certainly a most beautiful and striking-looking personage.

"Is General Custer not here, sir?" she asked, quickly, addressing Henry Vassar.

"He has been, miss; but he has gone."

"Will you not dismount?"

"No, thank you; but how long has he been gone, sir?" and her manner seemed nervous.

"About fifteen minutes."

"Which trail did he take?"

Henry Vassar hesitated, for there was that in the manner of his strange interlocutor that caused him to dread to tell her, as he did not know why she sought the general.

"Don't hesitate, sir, when a man's life hangs on a minute of time."

"Tell me quickly which trail he took!"

Her manner was imperious and her splendid eyes flashed.

"Why should you know?" asked the settler.

With an impatient exclamation she wheeled her horse, rode to the rock, examined the tracks there, and then went off at a gallop to the bars.

These she cleared with a leap as before, and drawing rein sprung to the ground.

She looked an instant at the various trails, seemed to find quickly the one she sought, and springing into the saddle with a grace and ease that were marvelous, went flying along on the very trail General Custer had taken.

"Father, who is she, and what does she want with General Custer?" said Pearl, anxiously.

"I fear I was wrong not to have told her at once, for she can be no other than that mysterious Mountain Maiden the general told us about, and she is evidently anxious to warn him of other dangers."

"I will mount my horse and follow," said the settler.

"And we will go, too," cried Ruby, and before the strange girl had gotten more than half a mile away Henry Vassar and his daughters were in chase.

But their trail led them out to the edge of the timber, where an extensive view of the prairie could be seen.

"Why, father! he is not in sight," cried Pearl.

"Then he did not come this trail," the settler responded.

"We should have followed his trail as that girl did, for by not doing so, we have lost him," Ruby said.

"He has not come in this way, for we can see three miles ahead, and neither has the girl."

"Then, father, he kept on the right-hand trail through the timber, and she followed him," Ruby said.

"Well, we will have to ride back a mile and take the trail through the timber," and the settler started off at a canter, followed by his daughters.

The trail was reached after a rapid gallop, turned into and followed, for Ruby's quick eyes now caught sight of the fresh hoof-marks of the general's horse and of the maiden's.

A ride of a mile brought them around a sharp bend of a hill, and before them was a horseman.

They all drew rein at once, while the settler cried:

"Hullo, Golden! how far ahead is General Custer?"

"I have not seen the general, sir, since he left my ranch early this morning."

"Good-afternoon Miss Ruby and Miss Pearl," was the quiet reply.

"You certainly must have seen the general if you came on this trail, Golden?"

"I certainly did not, sir."

"When did you strike this trail?"

"Half an hour back."

"Ah, that accounts for it; but did you see no one else?"

"No, sir; who else do you refer to?"

"A rider who was anxious to overtake the general, and whose manner was so anxious, we followed fearing trouble."

"General Custer is amply able to take care of himself, Mr. Vassar, if you fear the one who sought him meant harm."

It was evident that the ranchero thought the one whom the settler referred to was a man, and Henry Vassar allowed him to so believe, and he gave Pearl a quick glance as she was about to say that it was a young girl who meant to warn the general, they thought, of other danger in his path.

For some reason Henry Vassar did not wish to let Gabriel Golden into the secret of the mysterious Mountain Maid, and so he said:

"Well, after all, the party may have been only anxious to overtake the general to tell some news, and whatever the motive, it is too late now to expect to overtake them, so, girls, we will return home, and will you not accompany us, Golden?"

"A part of the way, thank you, as I am going over to the further settlement on a matter of business."

"Better spend the night with us, Golden, and go on in the morning, for the sun will set by the time we reach home."

"No, thank you, Settler Vassar, I must go on to-night—hark!" as he spoke there was heard in the distance the rapid fire of a repeating-rifle.

CHAPTER XXXIV.

A CLOSE CALL.

WHEN Thunder Cloud left the retreat of Clint Carl, the Gold Ghoul, determined to carry out his plot against General Custer, which the renegade against his own race had concocted and inveigled him into, he had been already preceded upon that mission by the deserter, who meant not to be cheated out of his revenge against the general.

His talk with his "white brother," as Thunder Cloud called Clint Carl, had done him great good.

He had believed all that the cunning white chief had said, that he was to be made a cat's-paw of for chestnuts of Clint Carl's roasting.

"Once I get this Sioux chief to capture and kill Custer I can grow rich during the excitement that will follow it, and especially if Buffalo Bill is also captured and slain, and there is no reason why he should not be."

"Those Powell Brothers are a desperate lot to arouse, I admit; but they will not dare venture from the fort in the alarm that follows the killing of Custer and Cody."

"No; the Sioux will have the whole frontier at their mercy, and settlers and miners will fly for their lives, and I will pillage myself rich and then quit this dangerous life of gold-mining at the revolver's muzzle."

"Custer will meet Thunder Cloud, there is no doubt of that, for he is most anxious for peace, and it will be a feather in his cap if he can command it, as he will think, with such a small force as he has."

"Oh, yes; he will be at Meeting Rock and his doom is sealed, and I can carry out my plans, for all the Sioux and the Cheyennes will rally to the aid of Thunder Cloud with Custer dead by his hand."

"And I can control Thunder Cloud, if that wily old chief Sitting Bull and his council chiefs don't step in and assume control over Cloud's head."

"If old Panther Eye was not childish, Sitting Bull would not dare do it, but Thunder Cloud is a young man comparatively and may be overtopped; but I shall use my influence for my red brother."

So argued Clint Carl after the departure of Thunder Cloud, and the latter rode back to his village completely under the influence of the outlaw renegade.

He had been well schooled in what he was to do, and he was to bring upon the war-path every horse he could take from his village, while runners were to be sent to the villages of other Sioux, and Cheyennes, asking for a force from each one of them.

With Custer and Buffalo Bill dead, and a successful attack upon the fort, Thunder Cloud felt sure that he would be made the mighty chief commandant of the combined warriors of the Sioux and Cheyenne villages, and Sitting Bull and other chiefs would not dare assert their rights as his superior.

Ambitious, as many a white man has been before him, and will be, Thunder Cloud saw himself the greatest general of his people, and he rode homeward swelling with pride at what he was to become by his grand stroke against the pale-faces."

So excited did he become that he lost his naturally stolid nature, and a yell of triumph broke from his lips, while he urged his horse into a run."

The clatter of those hoofs saved the life of Thunder Cloud then and there.

Had he ridden on, as a few moments before, in meditative mood, he would have come suddenly upon two persons who would have had his scalp.

Those two were no other than Night Hawk George and Broncho Bill.

They were seated upon a huge rock, eating their midday meal, and but a few yards from the valley trail.

The clatter of hoofs caused them to quickly drop out of sight behind the rock.

Their horses were feeding up a canyon not far away, and they had gone to the valley trail to see if there were traces of any horses having passed up or down it within the last few hours.

Having made the discovery that there were several fresh-made hoof-tracks, and by unshod ponies, they had quietly sat down upon the rock to eat their dinner, when the excitement of his ambitions meditations brought the yell from the lips of Thunder Cloud, and caused him to urge his horse into a run.

This warned Night Hawk George and Broncho Bill of his coming, and, unable to retreat to their horses back in the canyon, they stood at bay, sheltered by the rock.

But, as he drew near the rock, Thunder Cloud seemed to realize that he had forgotten the stolid dignity so becoming in an Indian chief, and he reined his horse down to a walk and came slowly on his way.

Had he come with a rush, confident that he had in some way discovered their presence there, and was charging upon him, Night Hawk and Broncho Bill would have greeted him with a dose of lead, and thus checked his ambitious dreams forever, and thus, perhaps, prevented the cruel war that followed, so often do mighty events hinge upon a small matter, which at the time of its occurrence seems but an atom in itself.

As he drew rein, however, and his pony came along at a walk, the two scouts saw that he was not aware of their presence.

"Shall I kill him, George?" coolly asked Broncho Bill.

"It is Thunder Cloud."

"Yes."

"He is a great chief, and about fifth in command of his tribe, I believe."

"I can promote some other brave to his place, for death leaves a vacancy," Broncho Bill remarked.

"Billy!"

"Well?"

"Do you think he is alone?"

"George, I was so pleased at sight of him, I never thought of that."

"I do not see why he should be."

"Fact, unless he imitates General Custer, and often goes it alone."

"If there are others we will get into a hornets' nest."

"True, and red hornets have a mighty sting, so we'll let him go by, unless he sees us."

"Yes, unless he sees us, Billy."

"And if he does, he'd better take a good look, for it will be his last," was Broncho Bill's significant remark.

The chief was now not ten rods away, and coming slowly along.

But behind him, a hundred yards back was a bend in the trail, and following him might be a score, or a hundred red-skins, the two brothers well knew.

So it was discretion to allow the chief to pass on, unless he discovered them, in which case the Sioux would lose their loved Thunder Cloud.

For once in his life Thunder Cloud was too much wrapped up in his own thoughts to take observation of all that he passed on the trail, and he calmly rode by the rock without seeing the two scouts, and their rifles covering him.

Passing on he was soon out of sight up the trail, and Broncho Bill and Night Hawk kept their eyes strained to see others that might ride into view.

They dared not attempt to reach the canyon where their horses were, as they would be seen, they knew, by any Indians rounding the hill, and so they waited.

After a long time Broncho Bill said:

"George!"

"Well, Billy?"

"We made a mistake."

"Sure."

"We should have pierced Thunder Cloud with lightning."

"We should have done so, for I am not certain he was alone."

"Well, we'll make up for it another time; but now let us go back to our horses and follow his trail, for I believe he has just come from the den of the Gold Ghouls, for it lies in that direction."

"I would not be surprised, and if he has, there has been some mischief hatched out between Clint Carl and that Indian."

"No doubt; but what made him give that yell and ride like John Gilpin for a few hundred yards?"

"I don't know, unless a wasp stung him," was the reply, and the brothers left their hiding-place and returned to the canyon.

Avoiding the trail, excepting to go on foot to it now and then and see if the track of the chief's horse still followed it, they held on their way down the valley in search of the retreat of the Gold Ghouls.

CHAPTER XXXV.

THE "SHADOW" IN THE PATH.

WHEN General Custer rode away from the Sunset Ranch, he started at a brisk canter, taking the trail through the timber, instead of the one that would lead him across the prairie, and which was a longer one to his camp.

He had not gone more than a couple of miles when he suddenly came to a halt, for he saw a horse and rider suddenly emerge from the timber upon one side of the trail and halt in the trail before him.

"As sure as I live it is my Shadow, as Gaston called that girl."

"What is she doing here, I wonder, and what is up now?" he muttered.

Then, as he saw that she had halted directly across the trail, he rode on and politely raised his hat as he drew near, while he said pleasantly:

"We meet again, my fair and mysterious Shadow."

"It is better that I should shadow your path, General Custer, than that the shadow of death should fall upon you."

"Pardon me, but I meant not to wound you,

for I assure you I appreciate too highly what you have done for me in the past.

"Let me again thank you, and say that I hope now you will let me know who my sweet friend is, and also I would offer you the hospitalities of my camp, if you ride that way."

"I thank you, General Custer, but I am here to tell you that a snake lies in your path to strike you, should you go on in this trail."

"Indeed! and who might the snake be?" he asked, coolly.

"If you approach as you are now going, you will be shot from an ambush, so come with me and I will show you who your enemy is, though you cannot get near enough to strike him in his lair."

"I will go with you," he replied, and she wheeled from the path and went back the way she had come.

He tried to ride alongside of her, but she urged her horse on ahead, and at the same time motioned to him not to speak.

A ride of half a mile, in a semicircle, brought them to the top of a ridge.

Here she sprung from her horse and told him to dismount.

He obeyed in silence, and ascending to the top of the hill she peeped over.

He did the same, and there he could see, nearly half a mile away where the trail he had been following wound out of the timber across the prairie.

Nor was this all that he saw, for behind a clump of pines he beheld a horse hitched, and beyond him, near the trail, and but a few yards from it was a pile of rocks, behind which crouched a man holding a rifle in his hands.

"There is the snake I spoke of, General Custer, so look at him through your glass and you may recognize who he is; but unfortunately you cannot reach him, for, to approach along the trail he would kill you, and to ride over the hill and advance upon him would but warn him of your coming."

He took his field-glass from its case and placed it to his eyes.

For some time he gazed in silence through it and then said:

"Yes, I know him, and you have indeed again saved my life."

He had not taken the glass from his eyes and continued:

"He is Burton Segus, the deserter, who once before you saved me from, and not far from here in the Red Brook Valley."

As he got no reply he lowered his glass and turned to where she had stood when she bade him see if he recognized his intended assassin.

But she was gone.

He sprang to his feet and gazed about him. But she had glided away without a sound.

He went back over the hill to where they had left their horses.

His was there awaiting him, but hers had gone.

"Well! if that girl is not like a shadow indeed! I cannot understand her."

"She has gone, and I will not follow her."

"No, I will mount and ride down upon Mr. Segus, and if he is so anxious to kill me, he shall have a fair chance, and I shall claim the same right."

So saying, General Custer mounted his horse and rode over the hilltop, his rifle in hand, for he always carried a rifle when alone, for any foe or game that might cross his path.

To approach the deserter unseen he knew would hardly be possible, as the keen ears of the man would hear his approach, and he cared not to sneak upon an enemy and take him unawares, as it was not his nature to do so.

So he rode boldly down the hill, hoping that the man, when he heard him coming and saw who he was, would advance to meet him and thus seek openly the revenge he had tried to gain by assassination.

The keen ear of Segus, the deserter, heard the hoof-falls, and at once he sprung to his feet.

A cry of alarm broke from his lips as he saw that his intended victim had flanked him, and he ran like a deer toward his horse.

He well knew the desperate courage of Custer when aroused, and more, he knew too his deadly aim with rifle and revolver.

So he sped like the wind toward his horse, severed the rein that made him fast to a tree with one blow of his bowie, and sprung into the saddle.

The moment he started in flight General Custer spurred toward him.

He certainly expected the man to meet him, once he had mounted.

But the deserter had no such intention.

He was a coward, an assassin, and he would not seek openly what he could gain from an ambush.

So he put spurs to his horse in ignominious flight.

For an instant General Custer seemed about to pursue; but he checked his intention, and from his lips broke in derisive tones the one word:

"Coward:

Then raising his rifle to his shoulder he sent half a dozen bullets flying after the fugitive, though with no hope of hitting him at that distance and no desire to hit a man flying in fear.

These were the shots heard by the ranchero and others a mile away.

Having sent the bullets flying after the deserter, General Custer coolly turned into the trail and continued on his way to his camp, wondering more and more at the mysterious "Shadow" that seemed to follow him as though indeed his own shadow.

CHAPTER XXXVI. A STRANGE LOVER.

THE reader has doubtless not forgotten that, when Pearl started from the valley, where lay Cunning Kit, whom Gabriel Golden killed, she went to get a spade for her father to bury the body of the unfortunate man who had dogged the settler's steps to meet his own death.

Leaving her sister Ruby with her father to watch by the body until her return, she had started off at a gallop for the ranch.

But she went not alone, as Gabriel Golden had said he would accompany her part of the way, as his steps led in that direction.

Once out of sight of the settler and Ruby, Gabriel Golden had gently taken the rein of Pearl's horse and drawn the animal down to a walk.

"Oh, but I must hasten," said Pearl.

"A few moments will make but little difference, Miss Pearl."

"But why wish to ride slow?"

"I have something to say to you."

"To say to me?"

Pearl's face flushed as she asked the question.

"Yes."

She was silent and made no effort to urge her horse again into a gallop.

After a moment of silence he said:

"Can you keep a secret, Pearl?"

"Yes, indeed."

"It is an important one."

"I can keep it."

"Can you keep two secrets?"

"Yes, a dozen, for whom have I to tell my secrets to in this desolate land?"

"Your sister or your father."

"Must I not tell them?"

"No, not now."

"Then I may some day?"

"Yes."

"I will do as you wish."

"Remember, you are to give no hint of what I say to you."

"I will not forget."

"You will pledge me your honor, Pearl Vassar, not to tell what I make known to you until I give you permission so to do?"

"Yes, but is it anything awful, for you almost frightened me?"

"No, I hope at least you will not think it awful, for the first secret I have to tell you is that I love you."

"Oh, Mr. Golden, I did not expect that."

"Yet it is true, Pearl, and I have loved you from the first."

"Do you mean it?"

"I do."

"I really thought you were smitten with my sister."

"I love her, yes, but in a different way from what I do you, and I hope you will tell me, Pearl, that you love me in return."

"I cannot say that I love you, Mr. Golden, but I will admit that I admire and like you very much."

"In fact I do not know my own heart," and she spoke with deep feeling, while the tears dimmed her beautiful eyes.

"Let me teach you your heart, Pearl, by telling you that you do care for me, and your love will grow in strength day by day as I prove myself worthy of it."

"I cannot now ask you to be my wife, nor tell your father that I wish you to become such; but before long I can do so, and I will make known to you why I cannot now tell you all that I would."

"I wish you to keep our secret for the present, and to promise me that you will love me and one of these days be all in all to me."

"Do you promise me, Pearl?"

She smiled and held forth her hand to him, and bending low, he imprinted thereon a kiss.

Then they were silent for a moment and she asked:

"Will you not let me tell Ruby, for this is all so strange to me?"

"I have your pledge that you will not," he said, starting slightly.

"I will keep it."

"Thank you."

"Now, is the other secret like this one?"

"No."

"What is it about?"

"You saw the man whom I shot?"

"Yes."

"Do you remember ever to have seen him before?"

"I do not."

"You are sure?"

"Perfectly."

"Did you hear what your father said when he saw him?"

"That he was unknown to him."

"He is not."

"What do you mean, Mr. Golden?"

"I mean that your father recognized that man."

"No, no, it cannot be."

"He did, though, and he knew why he was dogging his steps."

"Can you think this?"

"I know it."

"But why should he keep it secret?"

"He has his reasons."

"Mr. Golden, the best proof in my mind that I love you, is that I do not at once resent your words about my father," said Pearl, with considerable warmth.

"Forgive me, for I meant not to offend you."

"I saw that your father recognized the man, but did not wish me to know it, and I thought that perhaps you knew why."

"Indeed I do not, and I only wish that I did."

"Well, I am glad at any rate that I killed him, as otherwise you might have had to mourn for your father."

"And deep is my gratitude to you for your act, Mr. Golden."

"Don't speak of gratitude, Pearl, for it is love I wish you to feel for me."

"But I have told you the two secrets now, and I know you will keep them."

"I will, for you have my promise; but good-bye, for I see you turn off here."

"Yes, I am going to the sutler's cabin."

"Good-bye, Pearl, and think of me always."

He grasped her hand in farewell and she dashed off toward the cabin, while he held on in the trail they had been following together.

As she rode along Pearl's heart was in a flutter, and her brain fairly surged with the thoughts that went through it.

Did she love Gabriel Golden? she asked herself over and over again.

Her answer was invariably:

"I do."

His handsome face had won her admiration, and he had gradually gained an influence over her which Ruby had seen, though she herself had not.

She, in her innocence, had thought that he cared for her sister Ruby, and it gave her little heartaches at times.

But she had heard his avowal of love for her, and she believed him, little dreaming of what had occurred a short half-hour before, when he had told the same tale of love to Ruby.

Why he wished her to keep his avowal secret she did not know, and in blind confidence she did not ask him to explain, or urge for a reason.

He loved her, she loved him, and she would do as he wished.

So far had her thoughts run when she came near the bars.

With a nerve equal to that shown by the mysterious Maid of the Mountain several days after, she went at the bars with a rush and took a flying leap over them.

Then she found the spade, swung it to her saddle-horn and started back at a canter.

But her mind was now filled with the secret which her strange lover had told her about her father.

Could it be that he had recognized the dead man, and knew why he had been dogging his tracks?

Her father had always been so frank with her sister and herself, and she knew of no secret in his past life that he had tried to hide from them.

She meant therefore to watch him closely and see if he showed any sign of having recognized the man whom Gabriel Golden had slain.

Arriving at the spot, she flushed as her father said:

"Why, Pearl, if you had gone alone you would not have been half so long."

"You doubtless walked your horses, after you got out of our sight," added Ruby with a mischievous look, and Pearl felt that her face was crimson, and she faltered:

"I wish you had gone, Ruby."

"So do I," Ruby said in a serious tone that did not escape Pearl.

But her father already had the spade and was at work digging a grave, he having dragged the spot some fallen limbs to place upon it, to keep the wolves from digging up the body again.

Pearl dismounted from her horse and watched her father attentively, while Ruby held, in a red handkerchief a number of things, which the settler had taken from the body of the dead man, and cast aside as worthless.

But Ruby, from some strange impulse, gathered them up in the old silk handkerchief taken from the man's pocket.

If the settler did recognize

Pearl sighed, and soon after the grave having been filled in and covered with the logs, the three mounted their horses and rode back to Sunset Ranch, Pearl wondering if her lover was not right after all.

CHAPTER XXXVII.

THE RED-SKIN COURIER.

It proved to be a wise decision on the part of General Custer to divide his force, for his forming a camp of a hundred soldiers, nearer the settlement, certainly placed a barrier which held the red-skins in check from sending small raiding parties to pillage the homes of the settlers, and also to try and descend upon the scattered mining-camps.

The position of the camp was a good one, for it was on the spur of a hill, jutting out from the range, and with a stream of water washing its base.

The prairie, like the valley on either side, could be seen for miles, and in front the view was open across a level plain for a long distance.

Behind the camp was heavy timber-land, and thus the situation was most desirable in every respect for a fortress.

The position had been fortified by felling large trees and rolling them into position, a brush corral had been built for the horses at night, and two pieces of artillery had been brought from the fort.

Seated in his quarters one afternoon, the general was enjoying a chat with Buffalo Bill, who was still sore from his wound and bruised leg, when Surgeon Powell rode up.

He had been on a short scout across the valley, and said:

"General Custer, I believe that the red-skins are massing in the foot-hills, yonder, for I saw quite a number of fresh trails."

"Well, Powell, we must be ready for them, and are, as far as determination to do our best is concerned."

"I hardly think, however, that they will strike unless they can get all their villages to join them, for they must know by our being here, that we are ready for them."

"Thunder Cloud is an ambitious fellow, and he will only unite with the other chiefs, if he can have full power."

"He is not one to wish to have a chief over him, and old Sitting Bull and Crazy Horse will not allow a younger man to rule them, so I think we need not fear a general uprising until the Sioux and Cheyennes settle their point of chieftainship, and are willing to unite along the whole border against us," said Buffalo Bill.

"Well, something is up, for yonder comes an Indian runner," General Custer remarked, as he turned his glass out upon the plain when a red-skin horseman was seen dashing swiftly along in the direction of the military camp.

"Yes, he wears a white feather head dress, and rides a white horse in token of his coming on a peaceful errand," Buffalo Bill said, after gazing attentively at the coming Indian through his glass.

All eyes were now turned upon the red-skin horseman, who came along at the full speed of his pony.

He passed the Meeting Rocks, which rose grimly, like sentinels, in the middle of the plain, having the appearance of a ruined church.

On he came, straight for the camp, and it was evident that he was the bearer of some tidings from the Sioux chief.

He had a grizzly bear robe over his shoulders, a feather head-dress that was snowy white, and his pony had been washed up for the occasion, and was like snow in the purity of his hide.

He carried a long lance in his hand, and from the point fluttered streamers, to indicate that its point was covered.

At the same quick pace he came on, until at last he drew rein on the banks of the little stream, and raised his hands above his head, the palms toward the camp.

"Go and meet him, Powell," said General Custer, and the surgeon scout descended the hill on foot, as Buffalo Bill was lame, and no one else in camp spoke the Sioux tongue well.

The Indian watched the approach of Surgeon Powell with evident interest, and when he reached the bank of the creek, waited in silence for him to speak.

"Why has my red brother come to the camp of the pale-faces?"

"Does he wish to leave his own people, and dwell among the warriors of the great white chief?" asked Frank Powell in the Sioux language.

"No, Owl Eyes is no traitor—he is a young chief of the Sioux and loves his people and hates his foes."

"He has come for a talk with the pale-face chief, Yellow Hair," replied the Sioux, who was none other than Owl Eyes, the hero of the Spirit Nun's ruse.

"Then my red brother comes for peace?"

"No, the hatchet is not yet buried; but the great chief of the Sioux, Thunder Cloud, sent Owl Eyes to talk with the Yellow-Haired Chief of the pale-faces."

"Let the Owl Eyes come with me," said Surgeon Powell.

The Indian lowered his hands, seized the reins and urged his panting horse into the stream.

The Surgeon Scout walked back up the hill to the camp, Owl Eyes following him and his keen eyes taking in the situation with evident interest.

Wishing to impress the red-skin with his numbers, General Custer had resorted to a little deception, and the soldiers had hastily carried it out.

It was a warm afternoon, and the men lay about in the camp under the shade and in their tents, and each one, at the order of the general, got together all extra clothing, and scores of "dummies" were made up and laid here and there presenting the appearance of soldiers sleeping.

With this ruse there appeared to the eyes of the Indian courier twice as many troops as there really were in camp.

Surgeon Powell also took care that he should see the two twelve-pound guns, and the result was that Owl Eyes was deeply impressed with what he beheld.

He knew that the fort was also occupied and that a good force was there, and with as many soldiers in the camp as he believed there were he was sure that Thunder Cloud had underrated the strength of his white foes.

As he reached the quarters of the general, Owl Eyes slipped from his horse and stood facing him, while Surgeon Powell said:

"General Custer, this is Owl Eyes, a young chief of the Sioux, and he comes from the great chief, Thunder Cloud to have a talk with you."

The general saluted the messenger, a seat was placed for him, and a pipe was filled by Buffalo Bill and handed to him.

The pipe passed around in silence, and then General Custer said:

"I am glad to see the chief Owl Eyes."

"He is a great warrior, and my soldiers know of him."

"I am glad he has come as a friend."

Buffalo Bill interpreted the words of the general, and Owl Eyes smiled with delight to feel that he was so well known.

Then he arose and made his little speech.

He said that he had come from Thunder Cloud, who wished to have a talk with the mighty pale-face chief.

He said that his people had been driven from their homes, and, warming with the subject, he told over the same old Indian stories of abuse so familiar to all white people who have held "powwows" with red-skins.

"What does my brother wish?" asked General Custer, when he had heard the speech of Owl Eyes interpreted.

"The chief Thunder Cloud is yonder among the foot-hills."

"He wishes to talk with the great white chief to see if the hatchet cannot be buried."

"He will, with Owl Eyes, come to the rocks yonder, and meet the white chief, who will come with the great scout Buffalo Bill."

"But the scout is wounded," said the general.

"Oh, no, general, I am ready to go, for I am not much hurt, Buffalo Bill quickly rejoined, while Surgeon Powell said *sotto voce*:

"Yes, go, Bill, for if they think you are unable to fight they will believe they have got the United States army by the tail."

Buffalo Bill laughed and returned:

"You flatter me, Frank; but I'll go, if the general wishes."

"Say that we will be there," said General Custer.

"When the sun is yonder, the Thunder Cloud and Owl Eyes will leave the foot-hills," and the Indian pointed to a part of the sky which would make the sun about an hour high when the meeting was to take place.

"All right, chief," responded the general, and then he had food brought for his red guest, who soon after mounted his horse and rode away, deeply impressed with his pale-face foes.

CHAPTER XXXVIII.

TO BAR THEIR WAY.

"WELL, Cody, what can Thunder Cloud be up to, in wanting a council of war."

"This is not his style," said General Custer, when Owl Eyes had taken his departure.

"I was thinking of that very thing, general."

"You think he is up to some trickery?"

"Without doubt, sir; but I can't see through it."

"Wonder if he does not wish to capture you and Bill, general?" laughed the Surgeon Scout.

"He will hardly be able to do that, with only himself and Owl Eyes, for no other red-skins can leave the foot-hills without our seeing them."

"Unless they are all ready hidden in Meeting Rock," suggested Buffalo Bill.

"Call the sentinels that have been on duty all the morning, please, Captain Taylor, and we will see if there have been any Indians seen in the plain since dawn."

This order was obeyed, and the sentinels reported that not an Indian had been seen, excepting Owl Eyes.

"Well, we will see, Cody, and go ready for

work, and the men shall all be mounted and ready to charge out to our aid, if we need it."

"We are going on a mission of peace, of course, but then we must be prepared to fight the devil with fire," and General Custer gave his orders for the men to be mounted and in fighting trim, when he and Buffalo Bill should ride forth upon their mission to meet Thunder Cloud.

The hours passed away and the time for starting came.

The horses of the general and the scout were led up, and once mounted Buffalo Bill said with a laugh:

"I am not so near dead as I thought, and I guess I could stand a little fighting racket if it came to it."

Then General Custer and the scout rode out of camp, down the hill and crossed the stream.

As they did so they saw the two Indians ride out of the timber on the foot-hills and advance toward them.

The nature of the ground over which the general and the scout were to pass was generally smooth; but there were here and there a few water-washes and holes in the plain, which was covered with grass, excepting two or three bare spots.

They had gone about half-way to the Meeting Rock, when the keen eyes of Buffalo Bill suddenly saw a movement in one of the shallow ravines, or water-cuts.

He saw a hand waved to them.

"General, see there!"

"Some one is certainly there and waving to us, Cody."

"Yes, sir, and at the same time trying to keep from being seen by the red-skins."

"It looks so."

"It is so, sir; see! that is a direct beckon."

"May it not be a trap?"

Buffalo Bill had the same idea, so quickly leveled his glass at the one who had attracted his attention, and who was in a cut a little off the right of their direct course to meet the Indians.

"General!"

"Well, Bill?"

"There is no danger there."

"You recognize the person who signals us?"

"Yes, sir."

"Who is he?"

"Your Shadow."

"Ha! again?"

"Yes, sir."

"Then those red-skins are up to some rascality."

"Surely, sir; but we will move from our course and go by yonder cut."

"They will think we are trying to round some divide."

They accordingly went off at a right oblique, and soon after drew near the cut, in which they now saw a human being.

It was the mysterious maiden, and she was crouching in the cut, which was but a few feet deep, and her horse lay near her, hopped so as to keep him from rising, if alarmed.

To account for their stopping, that the Indians might suspect nothing, Buffalo Bill dismounted and pretended to be fixing his saddle-girth.

"Well, young lady, we meet again?" said the general, addressing the crouching girl, who was some thirty feet away.

"Yes, and I came here last night and remained to warn you."

"And of what?"

"That Clint Carl, the Gold Ghoul chief, has urged upon Thunder Cloud a trap to kidnap you and the scout."

"Thunder Cloud was to ask you to meet him yonder at the rocks, for a peace talk, and last night Clint Carl and half a dozen of his men hid in the rocks and are now there to rush out upon you and capture you."

"I came here to hide and bar your way."

"Now, go back, for death lies before you."

"I need not tell you how deeply thankful I am, we both are, and we will heed your advice gladly; but to cause no suspicion that there is one here to warn us, we will round this cut, and ride on a quarter of a mile further."

"Then we will halt and see what the red-skins will do, for my troopers are mounted and ready to come to our aid."

"But pray let me beg of you to come to my camp, and tell who you are that has thus been so more than kind to us."

"No. Good-by!"

She seemed to intend to dismiss them, and they rode on.

After going quite a distance, and until they were within a few hundred feet of the Meeting Rock, they halted.

Thunder Cloud and Owl Eyes had also advanced slowly, but keeping on, as they supposed the scout had merely halted to fix his saddle-girth, they had reached the meeting-rock.

They drew rein almost within its shadow and sat there like bronze statues awaiting the coming of their intended victims.

"Bill, I never in my life felt more like making use of the old Broadway stage-driver's signal of triumph over another and putting my finger on my nose, which, being interpreted, means, 'You can't come it,' than I now feel like doing toward

General Thunder Cloud and his owl-eyed ambassador," said General Custer, as he came to a halt.

"I will follow your suggestion, general," said Cody, with a laugh, and in an instant his right thumb was on the tip of the nose.

Thunder Cloud had never ridden in a Broadway stage, but he seemed to understand the interpretation of the act if he saw it, for he turned to the Meeting Rock and at once half a dozen rifles rattled forth and the bullets came patterning dangerously near the general and the scout.

General Custer and Buffalo Bill received the fire unmoved, and then the former said, with a smile:

"There is nothing for it, Cody, but a retreat."

"Yes, sir; but I wish I had brought my rifle, and the Sioux would mourn for old Thunder Cloud."

Shaking his fist at the red-skins and their outlaw allies, who now dashed out from among the rocks in chase, the scout wheeled with the general and started off in flight.

They directed their course as much *away from* the cut where the mysterious maiden was in hiding as it was possible for them to do and still head for the camp.

But the commander of the troops had been closely watching all that took place on the plain.

He saw the general and the scout halt, and with his glass he beheld some one in the cut.

Then he gave orders for all to mount, and the very moment that General Custer and Buffalo Bill halted the second time the troopers dashed out of the camp.

And none too soon, for the red-skins came in swarms from the foot-hills.

"They outnumber us, Cody, five to one; but they think we have as many more men in camp, and I guess will not force us too close."

"Let us bear further to the right, for I wish to avoid having them discover my 'Shadow,' and we'll make the battle-ground half a mile below here."

The Gold Ghouls, seeing how well mounted the general and the scout were, had not pursued them far, but the red-skin braves came on with a rush fully four hundred in number.

But the troopers came gallantly on too, and as the general saw his men near he halted and waited for them to come up, when he placed himself at their head.

The first volley of the cavalry carbines was a disastrous one to the Sioux, and as Captain Taylor opened from the hill with his twelve-pounders, and threw shells into the red-skins' ranks, they quickly fell back, the soldiers following them slowly, but not wishing to go too far from their base.

As night approached and the Sioux had retreated with their dead and wounded to the foot-hills, General Custer also withdrew to his camp, feeling gratified at his escape, and that the Indians had been the sufferers for their treachery.

"There is but one thing to be done," said General Custer, "and that is to get troops enough to strike these Sioux a blow they will never forget, and in so doing we will also wipe out that band of Gold Ghouls who take refuge among them and are a curse to the Overland trails."

CHAPTER XXXIX.

A FLIGHT IN MID-AIR.

WHEN Night Hawk George and Broncho Bill parted from Gaston the courier, they went on their way to hunt down the retreat of the Gold Ghouls.

Such thorough plainsmen were they, that they dared invade any unknown country, fully assured that they could come out all right.

There were numerous trails through the Sioux domain which they read unerringly, and they started off upon the one that they believed would lead them to the secret retreat of the outlaw band.

It was slow work, for the trails were often lost from the nature of the ground being such as to show no trace, and this fact the Gold Ghouls knew was greatly in their favor.

But at last the two brothers got upon a track which they were convinced was the right one.

"You may be sure, Billy, that this is the track of the Ghouls, to and from the scenes of their lawless acts," said Night Hawk.

"I guess you are right, George, and we can be sure by camping upon the track to see some one pass."

So it was agreed, and taking their horses back to a safe retreat they got a hiding-place for themselves and watched.

They had not very long to watch, for soon they heard hoof-falls coming along the rocky trail, and a man swept by at full speed, and disappeared in the distance.

They could readily have killed him, but their object was to find the retreat, and killing a man would do them no good in that direction.

"That's the King Bee himself, George."

"Sure."

"Well, we can follow his trail the way he rides, as his horse would make a track on marble," and after waiting to see that no others

were following their leader—for the two brothers had foreseen the tall chief with his long beard and hair, and then decided that the one was a wig and the other false—they went in the direction which he had taken.

They followed the trail, slight as it was, as readily as hounds on a scent, and soon reached a country which was wild and rugged in the extreme.

"We are gaining on them, Billy."

"Yes, George."

"I move we find some camping-place about here, and one of us go out at a time to see what we can discover, for we must keep watch night and day now."

"All right, we'll do it."

A retreat was found that satisfied them, for there was grass and water near, and Broncho Bill made the first start.

He was gone but a few hours when he returned and told his brother that he had made a discovery.

As it was near nightfall they remained in camp and early the next morning started out.

The discovery which Broncho Bill had made was a trail that led up around the side of a mountain.

The mountain towered up from a canyon several hundred feet, and its side was like a wall of rock, while, by a strange freak of nature, as though cut there, was a narrow shelf, barely wide enough for a horse to pass along.

The trail led down under the steep, rocky bank of a river, which swept along like a cataract, and from there began to ascend the mountain by way of this narrow shelf.

From the entering of the trail under the river-bank to the top of the mountain, over a mile, there was no place where a horse could turn around, and if one missed his footing upon the winding path up the cliff, he would be hurled a hundred feet into the deep river below.

One man could hold that pass against a dozen, and Broncho Bill was sure that the camp of the outlaws could not be far away.

"Now, George, I didn't wish to go on a path, where there is no turning-back place for my horse until I reach the end, without your support, and so I did not go further than the cliff trail yesterday."

"But I'll go on now on horseback, and you follow slowly on foot."

"I'll do it, Billy, and I think when you reach the top of the mountain you'll be dangerously near the outlaw retreat, so be very careful, as they may have a sentry on the cliff trail."

"I'll go slow and keep my eyes open," said Broncho Bill, and he rode down into the trail under the river-bank.

Night Hawk George concealed his horse in a thicket and followed on foot.

After passing along the river-trail, Broncho Bill came to the shelf that wound up the side of the cliff.

He had gone that far on foot the day before; but the tracks showed him that horses had gone along, and he was of a nature to dare any peril that man could overcome.

His horse did not seem to like the idea, but he could not turn back, and with confidence in his master, he kept on.

As they mounted the narrow shelf-like trail, the river boomed along beneath with terrific roar, and no one but a cool head and iron nerve could dare the appalling gantlet.

But Broncho Bill had both, and glancing back to see that Night Hawk George was coming, he pushed on up the dizzy path.

He had reached a point where the shelf curved around the cliff, and halted as he gazed upon the scene of wild grandeur about him.

Some seventy feet below him was the river, and his horse looked down with glaring eyes and extended nostrils.

"It's all right, old fellow; only don't slip," said Broncho Bill quietly, and his voice seemed to reassure the animal, and he started on once more, his side pressed hard against the wall of rock, and his rider sitting sideways to give him more room.

"The deuce!"

The words broke from Broncho Bill as a snort of his horse warned him of a greater danger and he beheld a horseman appear in view.

Broncho Billy already had his revolver drawn, and the one he faced glared at him in horror and amazement.

"Who are you?" gasped the man, who was a thick-set, villainous-faced fellow, mounted upon a very fair horse.

"A Gold Ghoul hunter, and I guess I've struck a lead," was the unruffled reply of the young scout.

"I guesses you has struck a lead-mine if you don't crawfish down that trail so I kin pass."

"I never went back on a friend or foe, pard, and I won't go back on myself, so if there's any backing done, you've got to do it."

"You can't pass here."

"That a blind man could see."

"Then you slip over the tail of your horse, shoot him and let me pass, or it's death to us both."

"Pard, you take your own medicine you prescribe, and be quick about it, too."

And Broncho Bill raised his revolver.

Instantly the Gold Ghoul did the same, and two shots rang out.

They were both deadly.

The bullet of Broncho Bill pierced the brain of the Gold Ghoul.

The bullet of the outlaw sunk into the brain of Broncho Bill's horse.

The man reeled and fell from his saddle over the dizzy height, and the horse of the scout went down like a flash, carrying his rider with him, leaving the steed of the Gold Ghoul standing trembling upon the path.

With a rush Night Hawk came to the spot.

He looked down with horror and beheld the outlaw strike the waters.

Then he saw the horse fall, and Broncho Bill was on top and clinging to him.

"God grant that broke his fall," cried Night Hawk.

And he gazed with white face and staring eyes down into the flood.

A moment after he saw a head arise.

It was his brother's, and he uttered a shout of joy.

Then there was a struggle for life in the wild waters; but, a bold swimmer, Broncho Bill held on well, and at last reached a rock far down where the trail bordered the river-bank.

Night Hawk was there to grasp his hand and draw him out upon the trail.

"Scared, bruised a little, but still in the ring," said Broncho Bill, in his light-hearted way.

"The body of the horse broke your fall?"

"Yes, he saved me, and see, yonder he comes, and the outlaw, too."

"I will get my lariat and try and drag him ashore, so as to save your saddle and bridle," cried Night Hawk, and he darted back to where he had left his horse.

"And I'll get a fresh mount," Broncho Bill said, as he went back up the trail and caught the outlaw's horse, which was still standing where he had been when his rider fell dead from his back.

Leading the animal down to the river trail, Broncho Bill mounted, and upon reaching the rapids found that Night Hawk had cast his lariat over the horn of the saddle, and dragged the dead horse to the shore.

The traps were soon taken off and the body cast adrift once more, after which the brothers headed for their camp, for Broncho Bill was more shaken up by his flight in mid-air than he cared to admit even to himself.

"We will give you a rest, Billy, before we attempt other explorations; but that was the closest call I ever saw a man have."

"It was indeed," replied Broncho Bill, and he fully appreciated how near he had been to death.

CHAPTER XL.

A STARTLING COINCIDENCE.

THE things which Henry Vassar had taken from the body of Cunning Kit he had cast aside and never thought of afterward.

There was a buckskin pouch with numerous odds and ends in it which he had looked upon as valueless, and in fact, had he regarded them otherwise he would hardly have been interested in them.

A dirk, with a name engraved on the hilt, a leather wallet with some old papers and several gold-pieces in it, these were all, excepting the weapons which the man had had.

But for some reason Ruby did not consider the things worthless, or at least she picked them up and kept them.

Arriving at home she placed the old silk handkerchief containing the things away on a shelf in an out-house, and yet why she kept them she could not really explain to herself, only she was urged to do so from some feeling she was unable to analyze.

Some days after she was alone at the cabin, her father and sister having gone off together to "round up" some cattle, while she remained at home to look after her baking.

This done the idea flashed upon her to have a look at those things she had gathered up at the grave of Cunning Fox.

So she went out and took them from the shelf, and seating herself on a bench beneath a large tree that grew a short distance from the house she began to look over the effects left by the dead man.

She handled them in a gingerly way, for they were neither clean-looking nor attractive.

Emptying the buckskin pouch out in her apron, she discovered a small needle-case, a gold thimble, some buttons, a soldier's silver medal, pocket-knife, various odds and ends and an eye-glass case in which, however, there was something else than eye-glasses.

Drawing it out, she saw a gold-incased miniature, and she at once started as she gazed upon the face.

"It is his face," she said, aloud, and she looked at it long and earnestly.

"No, I cannot be mistaken, for two men cannot be so alike."

"It is true that it looks younger and not so bronzed as he now appears, but it is his face."

"How strange."

She held the miniature for some time and

gazed upon the face there painted in a most artistic manner, as though to indelibly imprint each feature upon her memory.

Then she mechanically looked at the back of the locket, and there saw engraved:

"To NINA,

"With the love of her husband.

"18—."

"Aha! out of the grave this speaks to me.

"And yet his wife may have died; but that he was married this proves.

"I will see what else I can find."

She opened the leather wallet, which was tattered and old, and found, besides the few pieces of gold there, some papers that were much worn.

They were of little value, as far as she could make out, excepting one, which was a kind of order.

It was written in a bold hand and read:

"You are to go in chase of Cunning Kit, and overtaking him, at once bind and gag him.

"Allow him to utter no word aloud to your men, and when gagged and bound hang him to the nearest tree.

"Be sure to know that he is dead before you leave him, for the man has nine lives.

"CLINT CARL,

"Chief of Gold Ghouls."

"Ah, Captain Clint Carl, this then is one of your special orders, is it?"

"Well, you write a good hand, that is certain, and it seems that the one you told to hang Cunning Kit did not obey, for the man killed over in the valley by Mr. Golden answered to that name, from the name engraved on his weapons.

"I do not quite understand all this, but it shall be cleared up in time, as there is too much at stake not to do so."

So said Ruby, and she folded up the dead man's things and put them away again, but this time in a more secure hiding-place.

Hardly had she done so, when she saw a horseman approaching.

"It is Gabriel Golden," she said, and went out upon the little porch to meet him.

"Ah, Miss Ruby, I am glad indeed to find you at home, for I have some letters and papers for your father, which I got at the stage station," he said, drawing from his pocket the bundle of mail referred to, and riding up to the porch and handing it to her.

"I thank you, Mr. Golden; but will you not dismount?"

"No, thank you, for I have to get home as soon as I can," and he rode off.

The letters were from relatives in the East, and the papers were some that the settler subscribed to, and received by the weekly mail, and tearing off the wrappers Ruby threw herself into a large arm-chair to read, when she was again disturbed by the approach of some one.

This time it was not her father and sister, as she had supposed, when she heard the hoof-falls, but a girl on horseback.

"It is that same mysterious girl.

"What can she be coming here for?" mused Ruby.

The mysterious maiden was not riding now, as upon her former visit to Sunset Ranch, on a run, but came along at a slow canter.

She, however, sent her white horse over the bars, as though she found it easier than to dismount and take them down.

She bowed to Ruby as she rode up, and asked in a brusque way:

"You know Gabriel Golden, miss?"

"I do, he has just left here; but will you not dismount and rest yourself?"

"I thank you, no, for I am not tired.

"You have a sister, I believe?"

"Yes."

"Is she here now?"

"No, she and my father are off rounding up some stray stock."

"I am here to warn your sister against Gabriel Golden."

"Warn my sister against him?"

"Why, what do you mean?"

"She loves him."

"You seem to be better informed than I am, regarding my sister."

"I am, for I know that she meets Gabriel Golden, alone, on horseback at times, on foot at other times, and I warn you that he is not one a young girl should love."

"More I cannot say, but I tell you the truth, and I have come here to prevent evil if it is in my power to avert it."

"You are very kind, and it is news to me that Pearl has clandestine meetings with Gabriel Golden; but now I know she does go frequently alone to the woods, she says sketching, for she carries her portfolio with her."

"She goes to meet that man, so watch her, for he can bring only sorrow upon her."

"Good-by."

"Stay, will you not dismount and remain with us all night?" asked Ruby, deeply interested in the strange girl.

"No, I thank you, for I must go."

"At least let me offer you something to eat, or a cup of tea?"

"I have food here," and she patted her haversack that hung at the saddle-horn.

"Will you not at least tell me your name, for most deeply do I appreciate your kind warning?"

"My name would be nothing to you."

"I am your friend, and I would not see your sister made unhappy, so warn you, for her."

"Good-by."

And she wheeled her horse and rode away, unheeding Ruby's call to remain.

"How strange a coincidence this warning, coming as it does from that girl after I had discovered what I had among that dead man's effects, and then following upon the discovery came Gabriel Golden himself, then this strange, beautiful, mysterious girl."

"Strange, indeed, are such coincidences, and I shall heed them as the strongest kind of warning, and, my sweet sister, I will keep an eye on you, for you have a secret from me, it seems."

CHAPTER XLI.

PLAYING RED-SKIN.

"WELL, Billy, how do you feel this morning?" asked Night Hawk George, as his brother awoke after a good night's sleep.

Night Hawk George had awakened early, and rising, had watered the horses and staked them out to a fresh spot to feed.

Then he had built a fire in among the rocks and cooked breakfast, after which he had gone to see if his brother was awake.

"Oh, I feel all right I guess, George, though I felt myself flying through the air several times during the night, and was glad that I woke up to find it was not so."

"George."

"Well, Billy?"

"I don't think I'd make a good angel, for I am not fond of flying through the air."

"You do it, however, with the greatest of ease."

"Ugh! don't let us talk about it, for I feel as if I was taking a tumble now."

"Well, breakfast is ready, and when we eat it I'll tell you what I intend to do."

They ate their breakfast, Broncho Billy feeling still stiff and sore, and then he asked:

"Well, George, what is it?"

"I am going to play Injun."

"Well?"

"I intend to go to the camp of the Gold Ghouls."

"You take big chances, George."

"No more than you took in that fly from the cliff, Billy."

"I tell you I can do it, and I'll rig up as a Sioux and go to-night."

"Captain Carl is not at the retreat, as we know, from what that dying Gold Ghoul said, and I can get a look at the lay-out, know just what force there is there, find its weak and its strong points, and all we need for a midnight raid upon them with soldiers enough to attack them."

"I'd rather say Buffalo Bill, Frank, Gaston and ourselves, than soldiers, as cavalry cannot move fast, and there is most generally some one idiot in a squad to spoil secret service work."

"We can gauge ourselves as two to one, and the surprise will help amazingly, while the Gold Ghouls would not know our force, and besides, would hardly be more than a dozen in number."

"I guess you are right, Billy, but I would like to have at least four or five more, and the general will let us pick our men."

"In that case it will be all right; but what is it your intention to do now?"

"Stay in camp here until toward evening and then get you to help me rig out as an Indian."

"I will go then to the retreat of the Gold Ghouls, telling them that I come from Thunder Cloud to see the chief."

"Suppose the chief comes in while you are there?"

"I must take chances on that."

"You will be in a tight fix."

Night Hawk George laughed and said:

"So were you, yesterday, but you pulled through all right."

"You have got a great nerve, George, and I guess could pull through in case of a surprise, so if you say go, I suppose you must."

"I will remain all night, if I have to do so, to gain what points I wish; but if I can see all I desire sooner, I will leave, saying that I will look up the outlaw chief."

"Well, luck to you, George, and I suppose you'll have it."

"I am to await you here?"

"Yes, for you need rest, and this place is perfectly safe, I think."

"I guess so, and I'll be on my blanket, up among the rocks yonder, so if any Ghoul or Sioux should come nosing into camp, I can surprise him before he does me."

The day passed away, and toward evening Night Hawk George began his preparations for boldly invading the territory of the Gold Ghouls.

As I have before stated, his darkly-bronzed face, clean-cut features, long, straight, black hair and wiry form, gave him but little to do to make up as an Indian.

As he had the rigs which the strange girl had furnished Broncho Bill and himself the night of Gaston the courier's rescue, he soon had a very respectable appearance as a red-skin, with his leggings, moccasins, head-dress and blanket.

He took out his razor and shaved close, then darkened up his face, neck and hands with red paint, after which he certainly would never have been supposed to be a white man by even a close observer.

The Indian pony which had been taken from Owl Eyes, and the trappings, which the girl had secured with the animal, helped to add to the deceit, and with his own faithful weapons ready for use, Night Hawk George bade farewell to Broncho Bill and rode out of the little camp just at midnight.

Having discovered the way to the retreat of the Gold Ghouls on the day before, he had no trouble in going there, for his prairie and mountain craft amounted almost to instinct.

So secure felt the Gold Ghouls in their reseat, that they never kept a watch, for, far in the Sioux domain as they were, and in a fastness that seemed almost inaccessible and was known only to the outlaws and Thunder Cloud and a few of his braves, they never looked to be tracked ed there and surprised.

As he went around the precipice, where Broncho Bill took his plunge, Night Hawk George could not but shudder, while he muttered:

"Poor Billy, I thought he was gone that time."

"But he does not seem to mind it much now it is over."

Passing along the dangerous shelf in safety, he made his way along the ridge and then down the canyon into the Lake Valley.

As he passed through into the valley, he saw camp-fires glimmering ahead.

He studied the ground and the approach carefully and soon discovered that the outlaw camp was securely located upon a point of land, with massive rocks, serving as a breastwork, across the land end, and which a score of men could hold against two hundred.

"Clint Carl has a level head," he muttered.

Riding along toward the point, he passed in between the rocks, and soon after appeared like an apparition to the half-dozen men seated about a camp-fire playing cards.

As his form loomed up in the background, looking like a shadowy horse and rider, the outlaws were on their feet in an instant, and half a dozen weapons covered him.

He saw his danger and raised his hands, while he said quickly:

"Don't kill me pale-face brother."

"It's a Sioux, pard's, so he's all right; but my! how he scared me," said Hazard Harry, who was in charge of the camp.

"Yes, me Sioux; me come from big chief Thunder Cloud."

"Where white chief?" said Night Hawk George, in perfect imitation of an Indian's manner and way of speaking.

"Why, I thought Thunder Cloud was off with Captain Carl now on a little game of kill and scalp," said Hazard Harry.

"Yes, Thunder Cloud big war-chief; he on war-path; but Panther Eye, mighty medicine-chief tell me, come to see big white captain," said Night Hawk George, seeing that he had made a mistake from the words of the outlaw.

"Oh! you come from the old medicine-chief, Panther Eye?"

"I thought you said you came from Thunder Cloud, and I knew that could not be, for he and the captain are together."

"No, me say come from Panther Eye, father of big chief Thunder Cloud."

"I understand now; but what does the old medicine-chief want?"

"Want know where Thunder Cloud and his braves now?"

"Want find him."

"What for?"

"Have something tell him from big medicine-chief."

"What is it?"

"Red Dog's tongue not crooked."

"Ah! you won't tell? Well, I guess you are right."

"Me want find Thunder Cloud very soon."

"Well, you will find him over near Fort Fearless, or about the settlements, where they are having a red jubilee about now, I guess, and the captain and his men are getting their work in, too, no doubt."

"But don't the Red Dog want something to eat?"

"No, have plenty."

"What, an Injun refuse grub?"

"I guess you are sick, Red Dog."

"No, me have eat; but must go now."

"Good-by."

"Good-by, Mister Red Dog, and hail us when you come again, for you very nearly got made into a sifter with bullet-holes, when you rode upon us as you did," called out Hazard Harry, as the pretended Indian rode away.

As he departed, the eyes of Night Hawk took in the situation thoroughly.

He saw the camp of the outlaws, and its strength naturally, while he discovered that

there were not more than half a dozen men in the retreat.

The approach to it he now knew, and once he had gotten away he pressed rapidly on.

As he rode upon the narrow shelf around the cliff, he saw his horse prick up his ears.

Instantly he halted, and distinctly came to his ears the sound of splashing water.

"By Jupiter! but the Gold Ghouls are returning, and are now crossing the ford a mile above."

"I am in a tight fix," he said, but with the most perfect coolness, in spite of his desperate peril.

CHAPTER XLII.

NIGHT HAWK'S NERVE.

It was on account of his sleeplessness on duty, and his wonderful talent for following trails by night, that George Powell had won from his comrades the deserved name of Night Hawk.

His eyes seemed to discover more in the darkness than most men's, and his ears were as keen as a wolf's.

He heard the splashing of the water up the river as horses crossed it at the ford, and he knew by the sound that there were half a score of animals.

In a direct line it was hardly more than half a mile to the ford, but by the road they must come to where he was, it was fully double the distance.

His position was a peculiar one, for he was upon the narrow shelf, just where Broncho Billy had taken his flight to the stream below, and the smallest pony could not have been turned around on that rocky footing, for it was hardly more than a yard in width.

He dared not attempt to back his horse, for a slip would send him over, and it was over two hundred yards to where the shelf turned off into the mountain-top.

To go forward would be to meet the coming outlaws or Indians, whoever they might be, for the narrow shelf ran down under the high, cliff-like bank of the river, and not until where its trail crossed the ford, was there a single place where a horse could turn off, and but one means of hiding himself, that he could remember.

Night Hawk thought quickly, and he at once decided as to his course.

He held up his hand an instant and said:

"Yes, the wind is from them to me, and that is in my favor."

"Then the roar of the torrent will help drown the sound of the plunge," he added.

Slipping quickly over the back of his horse to the ground, he cautiously crept between his legs and the wall of rock, and unfastened the girth of the Indian saddle.

Making his way to the head of the animal, he then removed the bridle and stake-ropes.

This he placed with the bridle behind him on the narrow path, and taking his blanket spread it over the edge of the cliff, and under the hoofs of his horse.

"I don't wish a drop of blood on the rocks to cause suspicion," he muttered.

Then he took out his bowie-knife, felt of its keen edge and said:

"Poor horse, you have got to suffer."

"But the brute must ever yield to man."

Catching a firm hold upon the nostrils of the horse, he quickly drove the knife into his throat.

There was a wild snort, a plunge, and while the hot blood flew into the face of the bold man he shoved the poor brute over the precipice.

Down he went with a heavy plunge into the foaming torrent below.

Gathering up the blanket and folding it, Night Hawk George seized the saddle and bridle and ran back up the narrow trail to where a tree had found growth in a crevice of the rock a foot below the edge of the precipice.

He had noticed the day before that the scrub-pine had a firm footing, and he at once took his stake-ropes, made a noose of it about the trunk of the tree and fastened the other ends into a swing below.

The Indian saddle and bridle he could have thrown into the torrent, but he did not know what use he might yet have for them.

So he strapped them upon his back and swung himself over the precipice into his swing.

The boughs of the pine and the trunk hid him from the view of any one passing above, unless they should happen to stop and look over, when he would certainly be seen.

"I've got the advantage of position if I am discovered, for I can get good aim from here I guess," he said, grimly.

And not a moment too soon was he in getting into his perilous hiding-place, for he heard the coming of the men who had crossed the ford.

"They are the outlaws, for I can hear the ring of the iron shoes upon the rocks."

A few seconds more and a line of horsemen came in sight.

They were riding slowly and pressing close against the cliff-wall.

There were nine of them, and the one in advance called back just as he got opposite to the tree.

"Here's the turn, pard, so look out!"

Hardly had he uttered the words when his

horse slipped, one foot went over, he tried to recover himself, failed, and with a shrill cry the animal went over the precipice.

A shriek from his rider followed, and down they went together into the torrent.

It was a critical moment for Night Hawk George, for the head of the horse struck the trunk of the tree, causing it to shake appallingly and some of the roots to crack.

But he did not move, but clung to the rope and against the wall.

The other outlaws uttered cries of alarm in a chorus of horror and their trembling horses stopped still.

"God have mercy! Poor Brick is gone," said one.

"Look out that we don't follow him, pards," another responded.

"Curses on this death-trap," cried a third.

"Come, pards, move on or we'll lose our grip," one in the rear called out.

And again the men moved on, slowly and with the greatest caution.

Night Hawk waited until their hoof echoes died away, and then he drew himself up to the shelf.

Unfastening the rope he slung the saddle and blanket upon his back and started down the dangerous trail at a quick run.

An hour after he dashed into the little camp, calling out to Broncho Bill as he did so:

"Come, Billy, we must get out of this and at once."

"You got there then, George?"

"Yes, I'll tell you as we ride along."

"Any one after you?"

"No."

"Where's your horse?"

"He went the way you did yesterday."

"Over the cliff?"

"Yes; but fortunately we've got the one you captured from the Gold Ghoul yesterday, and we can push along, and we must, for I found out that Thunder Cloud is on the war-trail with his warriors to attack the fort and settlement, if he has not already done so."

"I'm ready," and Broncho Bill forgot how stiff and sore he was to get started at once on the trail.

CHAPTER XLIII.

DENOUNCED.

WHAT Ruby Vassar had discovered, among the things of the dead man, Cunning Kit, what she had heard from the Mysterious Maid of the Mountains, caused her the deepest anxiety about her sister.

She liked Gabriel Golden after a fashion, and yet she feared him.

He had professed the deepest love for her and then, upon her refusal of him, had very quickly transferred his affections to Pearl, if the young girl was right as to the meetings between her sister and the handsome young ranchero.

So Ruby decided to find out for herself if matters were as stated.

She was a girl of indomitable will and wonderful pluck, and she would go through anything to protect her sister from a villain.

She did not wish to tell her father what she knew, not unless she could not accomplish what she meant to do.

So she greeted her father and sister pleasantly, told them supper would soon be ready, and remarked that Gabriel Golden had called and brought the mail from the sutler's store in the settlement.

"He did not stop, or even dismount, Pearl, so don't be jealous," she remarked, in a pleasant way.

Watching Pearl, she saw her slip out of the house and go to the trail that ran near by the cabin.

Still watching, she beheld Pearl go up to a large tree and reach up her hand.

Something white glittered in it, and Ruby remembered that the ranchero had halted a moment at the tree, as though pulling a switch.

"He left her a letter, and she has it."

"I hate to play the spy, but I must do so, for I will save Pearl from him."

That night Pearl retired early, and Ruby, with a face flushing with shame at her act, went to her sister's pocket and there found the note, as she had expected.

It was taken to the kitchen, and by the lamp she read:

"MY DARLING:—

"Meet me to-morrow at ten o'clock at the Cliff View, for I have something important to tell you."

"Don't fail."

"Devotedly,

"GABRIEL."

"I'll be there, too," muttered Ruby, and then she returned the note to Pearl's pocket and retired.

"Where are you going, Pearl?" asked Ruby the next morning, as Pearl was leaving the cabin.

"I'm going out in the woods, Ruby, for you know I have taken a great fancy for sketching of late."

"You must show me some of your sketches."

Fortunately for Pearl, while waiting for her lover, she had had time to sketch, and so she showed half a dozen pretty views.

"Don't you wish me to go with you?"

"Suppose you come for me in about a couple of hours."

"Where will you be?"

"On the ridge, among the pines."

"Very well."

So Pearl went on her way, having told Ruby to meet her at a point half a mile from Cliff View.

But hardly had she gone, when Ruby put on her hat, seized her rifle and belt of arms, and started out upon her sister's trail.

She had no need to follow it, for she knew where it led.

The note had told her that.

Arriving near Cliff View, a ridge that ended in a cliff, and from whence a fine view was visible, she saw a horse hitched in among the pines.

"It is his horse."

"That strange girl was indeed right," she muttered.

Then she advanced, and not wishing to spy upon the lovers, raised her rifle and fired at a squirrel.

He fell to the ground, a bullet in his head, while into view darted Gabriel Golden and Pearl, both evidently greatly alarmed.

"Why, Pearl! you here?"

"And you also, Mr. Golden?"

Quick came the response:

"Yes, Miss Ruby, I was going along the valley trail, saw Miss Pearl perched in the cliff sketching, so came and joined her."

"I thought you were going to the ridge, Pearl?"

Pearl's face was flushed at being found out, but she said:

"I changed my mind."

"Well, I am glad I found you, for it is most lonesome all alone."

"By the way, Mr. Golden, who is Cunning Kit?"

She saw him start, change color, and then he said:

"Cunning Kit? Why I cannot tell you."

"What! you do not know the name of the man you killed?"

"I killed, Miss Vassar?"

"Yes, it was Cunning Kit that was dogging father, and whom you shot."

"Is killing a man such an ordinary affair with you, Mr. Golden, that you fail to recall all those you have made graves for?"

"Why, Ruby! why do you talk so?"

"Miss Vassar is inclined to be facetious," said Golden, but he was very white-faced.

"No, I am inclined to be what you are not."

"And what is that, Miss Vassar?"

"Truthful."

"Miss Vassar, did a man utter that insult to me, he should die."

"I don't doubt it, sir; but I am a woman, and you think as such I wish to retreat from punishment; but such is not the case."

"Why, Ruby, are you mad?"

"No, Pearl."

"Why do you speak thus to Mr. Golden?"

"I will tell you, Pearl, and I know your good sense and pride will cause you to cast off a man who is treacherous and a villain."

"Miss Vassar?"

"Pearl, the day that Mr. Golden killed Cunning Kit, he told me he loved me, and asked me to be his wife."

"It was when you went after father."

"I refused his love, and he turned it over at once to you."

"Nay, hear me."

"He pretended that he had killed Cunning Kit following father, had words with him and killed him, while he really shot him to get him out of the way for some motive of his own."

"He was too proud a gentleman to search his victim after death, and so failed to find what I did, among the rubbish the poor man carried."

"And what did you find?" asked the man with a sneer.

"I found a miniature of you, sir, set in gold, and engraved upon it was 'To Nina, from her husband.'

"Ah! well you may start, sir, but I also found that what appeared to be a worthless piece of paper had on it the maiden name of your wife, her home and all, and it was evidently kept by Cunning Kit to be used against you."

"Now, Pearl, you know that man as he is, so come with me."

"No! she must remain with me."

Quick as a flash the rifle of Ruby Vassar covered the man and she said sternly:

"I would shoot you as I would a wolf, sir; but do not force me to bear the curse of your life."

"Come, Pearl."

"Oh, Gabriel Golden! you killed that poor man to hide your secret; but he speaks after death and condemns you—ay, he is avenged on you for his murder."

"Will you come with me, Pearl?"

"Yes—go, sir, and never again let me see your face, or I will be tempted to—"

Pearl paused and he asked, coolly:

"What?"

"Kill you!"

"Would you kill one whom you love, Pearl?"

"I loved you, yes; but I hate you, now I know you, and God bless my sister for saving me from you."

"Go!"

"You can go if you wish, for I shall remain here," was the calm reply.

Quick as a flash Pearl seized the rifle from Ruby's hand, and leveling it, cried in a voice that rung like a bugle:

"Go, coward, or I will kill you where you stand!"

His face paled, and he saw that she meant just what she said.

So he bowed low, with his sombrero in hand, and wheeling on his heel walked away.

They saw him mount his horse and dash off, and then Ruby said:

"Don't tire yourself aiming my rifle, Pearl, for it is not loaded."

"I just killed a squirrel, you know," and she burst out into ringing laughter.

It caused Pearl to rally from the shock, and throwing the weapon down, she put her arms about her sister's neck and while her tears flowed fast, said, with broken sobs:

"God bless you, Ruby!"

CHAPTER XLIV.

STILL SHADOWED.

It was a bitter blow to Pearl to find that the man she had so dearly loved was so utterly unworthy of her.

But she had cast him utterly out of her heart, and she tried hard to show Ruby how brave she could be, and told her it would soon be over, all pain for her lost love.

Ruby was more than kind to Pearl, after the affair, and showed her the proofs she had of Cunning Kit's, and they decided to still keep them in their possession, at least until Pearl could write to the address given and convince herself that there was no mistake whatever about the villainy of Gabriel Golden.

The letters were written, and the maidens themselves rode over to the sutler's store, distant some ten miles, and mailed them.

At the store they saw an aged woman, who the sutler told them was trying to reach the fort.

She had bought an old horse, and with her satchel hanging to the horn of the saddle, had ridden from the stage-station, she said, thirty miles away.

"I want to see General Custer, miss, and learn all I can about my poor boy, for he was a soldier, and they say he deserted and turned out bad," the old woman said to Ruby.

"If you will go home with us, madam, and remain all night, we will ride to the fort with you whenever you wish to go," Ruby replied.

"You are very kind, young ladies, but I don't wish to trouble you."

"Hospitality is no trouble on the frontier here, madam, and we would be happy to have you," Pearl said.

So the old woman accepted and went off from the sutler's, jogging along on her jaded old horse.

She said her name was Segus, and that her boy had always been wild and sinful.

She had a little home in Maine, and some money laid up, so she had come West to see if she could not find her boy, who she knew had been for some time set down on the army list as a deserter.

She was quite old, stooped considerably, wore glasses, and her hair was snow-white; but she seemed, notwithstanding, quite spry in her movements.

Arriving at Sunset Ranch, Henry Vassar gave her a kindly welcome, and she was made to feel at home.

She was told that General Custer was in camp this side of the fort, and to save her the ride there, as he often came to the ranch, Mr. Vassar said he would ride over and ask him to dine with them the next day.

This he did, and the general, who had intended going to the settlement, said that he would stop on the way and see the old lady with pleasure.

He rode back with the settler, and Mrs. Segus told him of her sad life, from her son's career, and asked to get all the papers in the affair of his desertion and trial.

The general did not tell her that Burton Segus had twice attempted his life, but merely said:

"The papers are at the fort, and I will send for them for you, and you can present them, as you say, to the President, and ask pardon for your son."

"I would like to go to the fort, sir, and see where my boy was, so, if you will let me do so, I will ride with you as far as your camp to-

night, and go the rest of the way in the morning."

"If you so wish, madam, and I will give you an escort to-morrow to the post, and Major Burt will give you all the papers in the case."

So it was arranged, the general in his kind heart, willing to give a recommendation of pardon for the deserter, who had attempted to kill him, for the sake of the old mother, who had said:

"I have but a few years more of life, General Custer, and so, as a dying woman, ask pardon for my poor, sinful boy, for I will make him a better man."

After one of the good dinners, which Sunset Ranch was famous for, General Custer and old Mrs. Segus started on their way to the camp, the general being most attentive to the poor woman, who had his deepest sympathy.

They had gotten a mile away, when the quick ear of the general detected the clatter of hoofs behind.

Turning in his saddle, to his surprise he saw the Mysterious Maiden of the Mountain.

"Still shadowed! What's up now?" he muttered.

Then up dashed the girl, mounted upon her white horse, and her handsome face flushed with some inward excitement.

The general had halted, as also his companion, and, as the maiden rode up, he raised his sombrero in salute.

But, unheeding it, she dashed alongside of the old woman, drew rein, and thrusting a revolver in her face, cried sternly:

"Segus, the deserter, if you move I fire!"

"My God! is there not some mistake here?" cried General Custer.

Without moving her revolver, or taking her eyes off the one it covered, the girl said:

"No, there is no mistake, General Custer."

"This man is Segus the deserter, and he meant to murder you by assuming this disguise and pretending to be his mother."

"Bind him, sir!"

She spoke almost authoritatively, and the general quickly wrenched the bonnet and gray wig off of the head, and the vicious face of Burton Segus the deserter was revealed.

"You are right, young lady, and I would have taken oath you were wrong."

"Put your hands behind you, Segus!"

The man was utterly dazed and cowed, so he obeyed.

General Custer then quickly bound his hands behind him, took the bridle rein, and was ready to go on his way; but he turned to the young girl and said, earnestly:

"Must you still keep yourself, your actions, as a mystery to me, after all you have done for me?"

"Yes; but let me ask a favor of you."

"Granted in advance."

"If that man escapes, he will report who has been the one to foil his actions, and I will be utterly ruined—yes, my death would follow."

"God knows he shall not escape," the general said fervently.

"Traitor," hissed the prisoner.

"The man is a Gold Ghoul, sir, so you need not fear punishing him by death, for he is guilty many times," said the girl.

"He shall quickly meet his fate, I promise you, for he is already under sentence of death."

"But I wish the men to see him as he was; so I will ask you to replace his wig and bonnet."

This the girl did with nimble fingers, and then, with a wave of her hand, ere the general could detain her, she rode away.

"Who is that girl, Segus?" asked General Custer, as he moved on his way, with his prisoner by his side.

"I do not know," was the sullen reply.

"You do know, but will not tell to spite me."

"I know if it was known that she had betrayed me she would suffer for it."

"I am glad you warn me of her fate."

"Come, sir, we will hasten on," and when General Custer rode into camp with his prisoner, there was considerable excitement to see the gallant commander guarding a supposed woman.

"Captain Taylor, this man is the deserter, Segus, who assumed this disguise to kill me."

"He is already sentenced to death, so order out a platoon, and, just at sunset have him shot," and the general's face was stern and pale as he gave the order.

The captain bowed and retired, the prisoner was stripped of his feminine garb, and half an hour after, as the sun touched the distant mountain horizon, a volley of carbines rattled forth and Burton Segus the deserter fell dead.

APTER XLV.

KIDNAPPED.

THE short fight which General Custer had had with the Sioux, after the unsuccessful attempt to kidnap him and Buffalo Bill, had caused the Indians to retreat sullenly to their domain, and the discomfited Gold Ghouls to retire to their retreat, as had been seen.

But the general knew that the Sioux were preparing to strike a blow and all the troops were kept upon the *qui vive* to meet an attack.

Other troopers of the general's gallant regi-

ment had been ordered to the scene also, and it was hoped that the Indians could be crushed by a few quick and decisive blows upon their strongholds.

But until reinforcements came, General Custer felt that he must remain on the offensive.

A great deal of anxiety was felt by all, with two exceptions, about Night Hawk George and Broncho Bill, who had not been seen or heard of, and especially since the defeat of the Gold Ghouls and Sioux was there dread regarding them.

The two exceptions were Buffalo Bill and Doctor Frank Powell.

Those two men, so used to getting out of perilous places themselves, seemed to feel that George and Will Powell would turn up all right.

Hardly had the echoing shots, which sent the deserter to his grave died away, when two men were seen coming across the prairie.

Buffalo Bill and Frank Powell had said that they would start in search of the two daring scouts if they did not soon come in, for Cody's wounded arm and bruised leg were nearly well.

"What did I tell you?" cried Buffalo Bill, as the scouts were recognized, and a wild cheer of delight went up along the line, as Night Hawk and Broncho Bill dashed into camp.

They had successfully passed through the Sioux lines and their story was soon told, each having a joke upon the other about the Death Pass around the cliff, as they called the shelf from which Broncho Bill had fallen and Night Hawk George had hung suspended while the outlaws went by.

They told the general just the force of the Gold Ghouls, and Night Hawk George said he could lead an army there.

Then they knew pretty well the strength of Thunder Cloud's village, could lead an attacking party to surprise it, and more, they knew that the Sioux and Cheyennes were all preparing for a grand war upon the whites, and that Sitting Bull was to be the chief of the Indian armies, for both brothers had crept up to a red-skin encampment one night, and overheard a council of war.

"Your services are most valuable, and I thank you, and shall heed your advice when we get ready to strike; but now we dare not move into the country with our small force, so must bide our time, and I fear we will never be able to catch the Gold Ghouls, for they will doubtless disband," said General Custer, and then Night Hawk and Broncho Bill heard of all that had taken place since their departure.

It was soon after sunrise of the following day that Henry Vassar dashed into camp.

His face was livid, and throwing himself from his horse, he said in a husky voice:

"General, the Gold Ghouls have kidnapped my girls."

"I opened the door at a knock, for the one without said he was a soldier with a message from you."

"We had just gotten up, and the girls were preparing to get an early breakfast, as I wished to go to the sutler's."

"I was felled to the ground, bound, and half a dozen men strode in over me, seized my children, forced them to put on their riding habits and hats, and carried them off."

"I released myself as soon as I could, and came to you."

"This is fearful news, Mr. Vassar."

"You say they were Gold Ghouls?"

"Yes, sir, disguised as Indians, for I heard them speak, for they thought I was unconscious."

"General, I am ready for the trail, sir," said Buffalo Bill.

"And I, sir," Frank Powell added.

"Billy and myself will go, too, and I guess we know the way," Night Hawk quietly remarked.

"General, I will be glad to go also, sir," Gaston observed.

"And I!"

And thus it went around, until General Custer said:

"Cody, perilous as is the risk, we must make an effort to rescue those young ladies."

"Yes, sir."

"Select your men."

"The three Powells, sir, Gaston, Mr. Vassar of course, and six soldiers whom I would like to pick out," promptly said Buffalo Bill.

"Only twelve of you, Cody?"

"Yes, sir, for twelve could go where a hundred could not."

"Night Hawk, you and George know the way, so you will have to be our scouts, and we must be ready to start at dark."

"Not sooner?" said the anxious father.

"We dare not start by day, sir, for the Indians have spies on our movements," Night Hawk said.

"Well, men, get your best horses, and three extra ones, one to carry ammunition and supplies, and the other two for the ladies to return on, should we not be able to capture animals for them."

"We will leave here in time to hunt out the trail from Sunset Ranch and start from there by dark," said Buffalo Bill, and having select-

ed the soldiers he wished to accompany him, and with difficulty, for all wished to go, in spite of the desperate danger, the scout began to prepare his party for the pursuit.

"God bless you, men, and bring you good luck," said the general, fervently, as they rode off on their way to Sunset Ranch, and many a godspeed from the officers and soldiers followed them.

Arriving at Sunset Ranch, the trail of the kidnappers was soon found, and it led directly toward the mountains.

"Now, George, you and Will know the way," Buffalo Bill said, and Night Hawk and Broncho Bill went to the front.

Arriving at the pass into the mountains, a lantern was lighted, and search was made for the trail.

"We are right; they have gone to the Gold Ghouls' retreat," said Night Hawk George, and they pressed on until dawn, when they went into camp in the canyon where the two brothers had encamped after Will Powell's fall from the cliff.

Here they remained all day, one man on guard all the time, and when the night came on, men and horses rested, they set out for the retreat of the Gold Ghouls, Night Hawk now leading, as he had been there, and the others following in Indian file.

Mufflers had been brought for the horses' hoofs, to deaden all sound, and also to prevent their slipping on the Death Pass, and arriving there Night Hawk had suggested that each man should dismount and lead his horse, so there would be no human life lost if an animal should slip and fall from the dizzy height.

Unerringly did Night Hawk lead the party over the dangerous trail, and at last came in view of the point of land on which was the camp of the Gold Ghouls.

Not knowing but that there might be a number of Sioux also encamped there, Night Hawk went forward to reconnoiter.

In half an hour he returned and said:

"They have retired for the night, but the camp-fires are still burning.

"We can reach them unseen, for they feel so safe here they keep no guard."

"How many do you think are in camp?" asked Buffalo Bill.

"That I do not know, but we will not have a larger force than our own to meet, and we can surprise them with all ease; but we must leave our horses here and go on foot."

This was decided upon, and dismounting and hitching their horses, the daring band stood ready for the attack.

Rifles were also left behind, only revolvers and knives being taken, and a soldier being left with the horses, to give an alarm if other foes should unexpectedly appear.

"Now, Night Hawk lead the way, for we follow," said Buffalo Bill, and they moved forward like grim shadows in the darkness.

CHAPTER XLVI.

ONCE MORE "THE SHADOW."

Not a sound did the daring scouts make, as they advanced upon the retreat of the Gold Ghouls.

They were led by Night Hawk Powell through the chasm in the rocks, out upon the point of land, and they reached the cabins without being discovered.

In one cabin voices were heard, and listening the scouts found to their joy that it was the Border Belles talking together, and they were alone.

Then the loud command rung out in Buffalo Bill's voice:

"Gold Ghouls, you are caged!

"Surrender, or no mercy will be shown you!"

There came glad cries from the cabin in which were the Border Belles, and curses and exclamations from two others, where the Gold Ghouls were.

A large log was then picked up by the scouts and one of the doors was dashed in, and in rushed Buffalo Bill, the Surgeon Scout and several soldiers.

Then the other cabin-door was dashed in, and Night Hawk and Broncho Bill led the rest of the soldiers.

There were a few shots and then cries for mercy.

But one of those shots brought down the leader.

And that leader?

He lay upon the floor, dying from a bullet-wound at the hands of Henry Vassar, and one look into his face showed him to be none other than Gabriel Golden, the ranchero.

"And you are Clint Carl, the Gold Ghoul leader?" said Buffalo Bill, sternly, as he gazed upon him.

"There is no need to deny it; I am Clinton Carleton, the Gold Ghoul, and as I have to suffer, I am only sorry that two-thirds of my men escape by not being here," was the response, in a voice that showed regret that all should not suffer as he did.

"I am sorry my shot saved you from the gallows," Mr. Vassar responded.

"I might as well tell you, too," continued the dying outlaw, seeming to rejoice in his evil life, "that I killed Cunning Kit, not because he dogged you, but because he meant to betray me.

"Also, he had discovered your secret, and I wished no one else to know it but myself."

"My secret?"

"Yes, Henry Vassar, you discovered gold in the hills near your home, and hoped to find there a fortune.

"Until you did, you kept it as a secret.

"Kit tracked you, found it out and told me, and I meant to get your mine when I found out where it was, and also to make your daughter Pearl my wife.

"Her sister turned her against me, so I kidnapped them both, and you, led by those accursed scouts, have rescued them.

"Now go and let me die in peace!"

They obeyed, though Buffalo Bill placed a guard over him.

There were two Gold Ghoul prisoners, and two dead outlaws, these being all there were in camp, the rest of the band, as their chief had said, being gone to the Overland trails.

The joy of the two sisters at their rescue was unbounded, and they shook hands over and over again with their rescuers.

Suddenly there was an alarm given, and soon after Broncho Bill came up to the cabins leading a horse, on which was a rider.

It was the Mysterious Mountain Maid, and she said quickly, without waiting to be questioned:

"You must leave here, and at once, for Thunder Cloud and several hundred warriors are coming upon your trail.

"Get ready, and I will lead you out of the trap that they think they have you in."

All eagerly obeyed her command, and Clint Carl, having died, was left with his other dead in the cabin, while the prisoners were quickly mounted upon two of the half a hundred horses found in the outlaw camp.

Across the sandy bar the mysterious girl led the party, and with their captured horses the scouts followed.

Into the mountains beyond she guided them, and keeping on at a steady pace through fastnesses where white men had seldom trod, she at last halted, just as dawn was beginning to brighten the eastern horizon.

"The Sioux are many miles behind you, and they cannot follow until the daylight shows them your trail, so you are safe, if you push steadily on, and can reach your camp by night.

"Good-by!"

It was her same old way of parting, with a good-by, followed by a bound of her horse.

In vain they called to her, for she heeded them not, and was soon out of sight in the timber on the mountain-side.

"Come, George, let us solve this mystery, and find out who that girl is," said Broncho Bill.

"If Buffalo Bill will let us go," Night Hawk said.

"Yes, you can go, pards, but you take big risks; but I would like you to find out from her all about the movements of the red-skins, if you can, and if you get into trouble, she will help you out," said Buffalo Bill.

A halt was made for breakfast and rest, and then the chief of scouts and his party went on the way toward the settlement, but with regret that Night Hawk George and Broncho Bill would again risk their lives by remaining in the Sioux country.

CHAPTER XLVII.

THE MYSTERY.

WHEN Night Hawk and Broncho Bill left their comrades, they at once struck out upon the trail of the Mysterious Maid of the Mountains.

They knew that her horse was pretty well fagged, and not expecting to be followed, she would hardly push on at a rapid pace.

What they meant to do when they came up with her they did not know; but Broncho Bill was deeply interested in the beautiful girl, and he meant to do all in his power to persuade her to give up her wild, mysterious life, and go to the settlement to dwell.

If she was one of the Gold Ghoul band, and strange to say no one had asked about her of the prisoners, the two scouts thought they could prevail upon her to give up the lawless life, now that her outlaw companions were scattered, their chief dead.

So on they went, Broncho Bill in front, until suddenly he drew rein, while a cry escaped his lips.

And no wonder, for there, upon the ground lay the beautiful Maid of Mystery, leaning against a rock, where she had drawn herself.

"My horse fell with me and I am dying," she said quietly, as the two scouts sprung from their horses and knelt by her side.

Her horse was feeding not far away, and he had trod in a hole and hurled her against a rock, breaking several bones and, as she said, fatally injuring her.

"No, no, you cannot be dying," cried Broncho Bill in great distress, while Night Hawk placed his hand upon her pulse.

"Yes, I am dying, and it is better so."

"But why?" urged Broncho Bill.

"I will tell you now, for there is no reason why I should not."

She spoke in a low tone and evidently with difficulty.

"I am a white girl and have no Indian blood in my veins."

"But my mother once was kind to a young Indian brave and he loved her."

"But she married my father, a ranger captain, and the Indians hating him came one night and burned his home, killed him and carried my mother off captive."

"The young brave who had loved her had become chief of the tribe, and he at once took her from her cruel foes and tenderly cared for her."

"Several months after reaching the Indian village I was born, and do you see this red tomahawk I have on my forehead?"

"Well, it is a birth-mark, and it made the Indians regard me as a child of the Great Spirit."

"Broken-hearted, my mother remained among the Sioux; but she brought me up as well as she could, taught me to speak my own tongue, and Thunder Cloud, whose wife she became, promised that I should some day return to my people."

"But this birth-mark made me ashamed, and when my mother died, two years ago, I still continued to remain among the Sioux, for I held great power over them."

"That wicked chief, Clint Carl, sought to kidnap me from the Sioux, although they protected him, and make me his wife, and he sent two of his men to capture me."

"One of them I shot, and it was from the other that General Custer saved me."

"From that day I determined to save the pale-faces from the red-skins, and you know how well I have done so."

"Knowing the dread all had of a poor nun captive, who took her own life by springing from a cliff, I got her clothes and played to be the spirit of that poor girl, and it has helped me, and helped your friend to escape."

"Knowing the movements of the Gold Ghouls and Sioux, I was able to do much good."

"Now Gold Hair is content to die."

She folded her arms upon her breast as she spoke, and said no more.

Presently she simply added:

"Good-by."

After that she could not or would not speak, and in two hours more she was dead.

Most tenderly the two scouts watched by her until the last, and then a place was found in a little glen for her grave.

They dug it deep with their knives, wrapped her in her blanket and placed her in her last resting-place.

The grave was then filled in, and protected with heavy stones from the ravages of wild beasts, and then Night Hawk George and Broncho Bill mounted their horses, and leading the white pony of the dead girl, whom the Sioux had named Gold Hair, they started on the trail to overtake Buffalo Bill and his party.

CHAPTER XLVIII.

CONCLUSION.

THE two Powell pards did not overtake Buffalo Bill and his party, for the scout had pressed rapidly along, knowing that he had the Border Belles to protect; but they arrived in camp a few hours after and sadly told their story of the fate of poor Gold Hair, the Mysterious Maid of the Mountains, and General Custer felt deeply the cruel end of the young girl who had become known as his Shadow.

Back to their home went the Border Belles, and their father having in reality discovered considerable gold in the hills, he sold his claim for a snug little fortune and carried his beautiful daughters back to the East to dwell.

But both Ruby and Pearl fell in love with army officers, and becoming their wives, they are now again with their husbands at a frontier fort.

That a cruel war did follow the scenes narrated, the reader well knows, and that it was in that war, upon the red field of the Little Big Horn, that the gallant Custer and three hundred of his gallant troopers bit the dust before the onslaught of Sitting Bull and his Sioux and Cheyenne warriors.

As for Buffalo Bill and the three Powells, they still live, enjoying the fame they won on the far frontier, and long after they are dead and gone will their deeds of daring be told in song and story.

THE END.

TWO REMARKABLE HEROES.

The Deadwood Dicks, Senior and Junior, are the Gentlemen.

There have already been Ninety Volumes Published Relating to Their Astounding Courage, Coolness and Skill.

In only one sense of the word can it be regarded as a novel statement when the fact is here recorded that literature has given many heroes to the world, and perhaps more than one reader will have to think a moment over this remark before the subtle delicacy of its genial wit strikes home.

But it is most essentially a half dime novel statement that will be news to many when it is added that literature, if traced from the dimly distant days when Adam was a mere child down to the present day, would show but few heroes that in the eyes of boyhood would be even judged worthy of comparison with the two greatest heroes known to American literature, or, to promptly reveal them, Deadwood Dick and Deadwood Dick, Jr.

Perhaps if everything were known of his career in bookland, Robinson Crusoe would rank above any hero ever offered to the boys of the world, for Robinson made his appearance a long time ago and his adventures have been translated into pretty nearly all the languages that are printable; but while Robinson is and ever will be a worthy personage, he is, it is to be feared, most decidedly a back number in the eyes of several millions of the boys and young men of to-day.

And then, too, Robinson's reputation was made and safely anchored to leeward at a time when competition in the manufacture of heroes of juvenile literature was so slack that it is scarcely worth mentioning. Had he postponed his debut until to-day, Robinson would have had to hire a press agent, of the very objectionable type known as a hustler, and even with that assistance the odds are that he would have experienced a severe frost.

Robinson, like many other bygone characters calculated to thrill the juvenile mind, labored under the disadvantage of having only a comparatively few adventures, and he was further very heavily handicapped by having to confine his adventures within the narrow circles of probability and common sense. The modern heroes of fiction for young America, who are now as countless as the sands of the sea, and of whom the Deadwood Dicks are much the most important, are not trammelled by any such confined conditions, and with the bars let down admitting them to the boundless expanse of the utterly impossible, it is but natural that their unnaturalness should bear away the palm of popularity, and such as Robinson be left far behind in the race.

Therefore the statement of the surpassing prominence of the two Deadwood Dicks having been so emphatically made, it will be as well to justify the emphasis with some facts about their history from a bookseller's point of view, before plunging into the seething vortex of their recorded lives.

Deadwood Dick made his first appearance before the public in 1877, under the auspices of Beadle & Adams, the William street publishers of popular literature for the masses, and for fourteen years he or his son has been reappearing at intervals, which were at first irregular, but they have now settled down to a basis of once in six weeks.

It was in 1885 that Deadwood Dick the elder made his final appearance after thirty-three volumes of adventure, and his son, Deadwood Dick, Jr., who had been growing up in them for many years, took up the running, and has kept it up to the tune of very nearly fifty volumes more in the six years that have passed since his remarkable father was buried.

During the fourteen years they have been on the market these stories have been sold at five cents a volume, and the circulation they have attained throughout the length and breadth of the land, has been in the aggregate something truly vast, for the entire series is kept constantly in print, and many of the early issues are now enjoying a sale of their twenty-seventh or thirtieth edition.

It can be easily believed, therefore, that the two Dicks are so firmly engrafted on the tree of popular literature for boys and young men, that their position is assured so long as their author can keep it up, and that they stand to-day head and shoulders above all rivals in the eyes of the public for which they have lived, and for which one of them has died.

American boyhood, and that is a tremendous factor in the land, now knows Deadwood Dick, Jr., a good deal better than it knows its catechism, and millions of young minds absorb the thrilling incidents of his career in his everlasting warfare against crime and his never-ending solving of impenetrable mysteries.

Millions of boys follow his stealthy footsteps as he tracks his vicious victims to their undoing, and then, when the victims are thoroughly undone, the millions wait hungrily for the next volume, which on every sixth Tuesday appears with the certainty of the Tuesday itself, and a new set of delightful thrills go thrilling away from Maine to California.

Mr. Victor, the courteous editor for Beadle and Adams, who told *The Evening Sun* what it wished to know about the history of the two Dicks, said that he had often had his attention called to what

are known as Deadwood Dick clubs, which are organizations consisting of from three to a dozen boys, who take turns in buying the Deadwood Dick novels as they appear, and reading them in rotation, so that in the case, for instance, of a club of six members, each member would be kept thoroughly informed of his pet hero's latest doings, at a cost of only five cents once in thirty-six weeks, while when nine of these economical young enthusiasts pool their issues in the same direction a nickel will serve the purpose for a whole year.

Mr. Victor, in his curious and interesting task of editing this phase of the literature of the day for one of the most extensive publishing houses in the business, has weighed the question carefully, and finds that a volume once in six weeks is just about the amount of Deadwood Dick, Jr., that his countless admirers can comfortably absorb and digest.

In England, too, this extraordinary series of eighty volumes telling of the doings of father and son has been republished for years, to the infinite delight of the boys and youths of Great Britain and the solid satisfaction of the London publishers that had the pleasure of thus getting square with America on the piracy question.

"When I received the first Deadwood Dick story," said Mr. Victor, "I was struck with the freshness of the author's style, and after toning it down a little sent it to the printers. The story made a hit and I accepted another and another until we found that the character was becoming unusually popular among our patrons.

"I kept urging the author to make the stories less terrifically forcible in the language of his rougher characters, and gradually the sulphurous nature of their dialogues became moderate enough to need but little editing, and at the same time the torrents of liquor that flowed like rivers through his earlier manuscripts, dwindled to rivulets under the influence of my appeals for less rum.

"The author urged the absolute truth of both the language and the amount of whisky-drinking that he attributed to his characters, but I begged in the interests of morality that the flow of both one and the other be curbed, and of course the stories were none the worse for his doing so.

"Deadwood Dick, himself, was also gradually reformed and changed from the outlawed terror of the law-abiding to the deadly foe of the law breakers, and when once that transformation was achieved his subsequent course in the path of virtue was an assured success.

"True, the path was a somewhat rocky, bloody and dangerous one; but no one who follows him along its various ups and downs can doubt its virtue, and from that virtue he never deviated."

The full and official list of the titles of this remarkable series would fill at least a column of *The Evening Sun*. It contains some real gems in the way of names calculated to attract the youth in search of a thrill. For instance there is Deadwood Dick's Device; or, The Sign of the Double Cross. A Wild, Strange Tale of the Leadville Mines—of Men of Steel—of Toughs and Tigers—of Road-agents, Regulators, Avengers, Adventurers, and of the Thrilling Life in the New Eldorado.

Can any one deny the comprehensiveness of that or his probable power of seducing nickels from the pockets of novel-reading boys? Then there are a number of delightfully alliterative titles, such as Deadwood Dick's Defiance, or, the Double Daggers, and Deadwood Dick's Double, or, the Ghost of Gordon's Gulch. Peculiarly fetching, too, in their forceful effect on the small boy's pocket money must be Deadwood Dick on Deck; or, Calamity Jane, the Heroine of Whoop Up; Deadwood Dick's Dead Deal; or, Captain Crackshot, the Girl Brigand; Deadwood Dick's Death Trail; Deadwood Dick's Death Plant, and Deadwood Dick's Diamonds. In the selection of localities for his adventures Deadwood Dick, Jr., shows far more desire for variety than the old man ever did, for he has volumes that relate his remarkable doings in New York, Chicago, Philadelphia, Boston, Cincinnati, Rochester, Buffalo, San Francisco, Denver, Galveston, Leavenworth, and even at Coney Island. The titles of the younger hero's volumes show that he met with and got the better of swindlers, bunco men, counterfeitors, bank robbers, horse thieves, smugglers, pirates, stage robbers, and, indeed, pretty nearly every sort of criminal known to the police, while his father confined him. If almost exclusively to rooting out the Western type of bad man. Progress has, therefore, a worthy representative in Deadwood Dick the younger.

It is surely not necessary to add that in the moderate compass of a newspaper article, only the merest shadow of justice can be done to the careers of any heroes that have had such an extraordinary collection of stories as that written about them. If a month or so were given to a careful reader for the task, he might, with the assistance of a double-entry bookkeeper, tabulate the number of blood-curdling episodes that occur in the eighty volumes, together

with the exact number of persons who are shot, stabbed, hanged and removed in sundry less conventional borderland ways, such as being tossed into quicksands, burned in the tops of forest giants, fed to bears or made to try and walk on tight ropes across bottomless chasms.

The final summary would be something appalling in its gory magnitude, and would form a record of slaughter that would shame the battle of Gettysburg, but it might prove a source of entertainment to some idle person of a sanguinary turn of mind, and so the idea is suggested here.

The variety of duels in these stories is another source of wonder to the reader, and it must be acknowledged that Mr. Wheeler has as prolific an imagination as it is possible to conceive. Every volume of the series fairly bristles with episodes of a nature that makes those related in the more ordinary 10-cent or 5-cent stories seem as mild as hotel milk, and hotel milk has been pronounced by scientists to be the mildest object in nature.

In coming face to face with the notes of a variety of episodes and adventures in the books which the writer made as he hurriedly went through the eighty volumes, and which he hoped to utilize in this article, an overpowering sense of having buckled up against the impossible rears its dread front and mocks the man who dared to face the task of doing justice to the subject.

Once or twice a flowing beaker of moxie or nerve food, has been tossed off, and with grim determination the struggle made to sift the material on hand and condense it into something like a reasonable shape.

With a heartfelt sigh the colossal task has, however, been reluctantly abandoned. There are the eighty volumes each so crowded with thrills and heart-tugs that it were madness to hope to do justice to them collectively and rank injustice to discriminate between them. The three larger pictures illustrating this article have been selected at random from eighty just as interesting, and the smaller ones are porraits of Deadwood Dick, his wife, Calamity Jane, and Deadwood Dick, Jr.

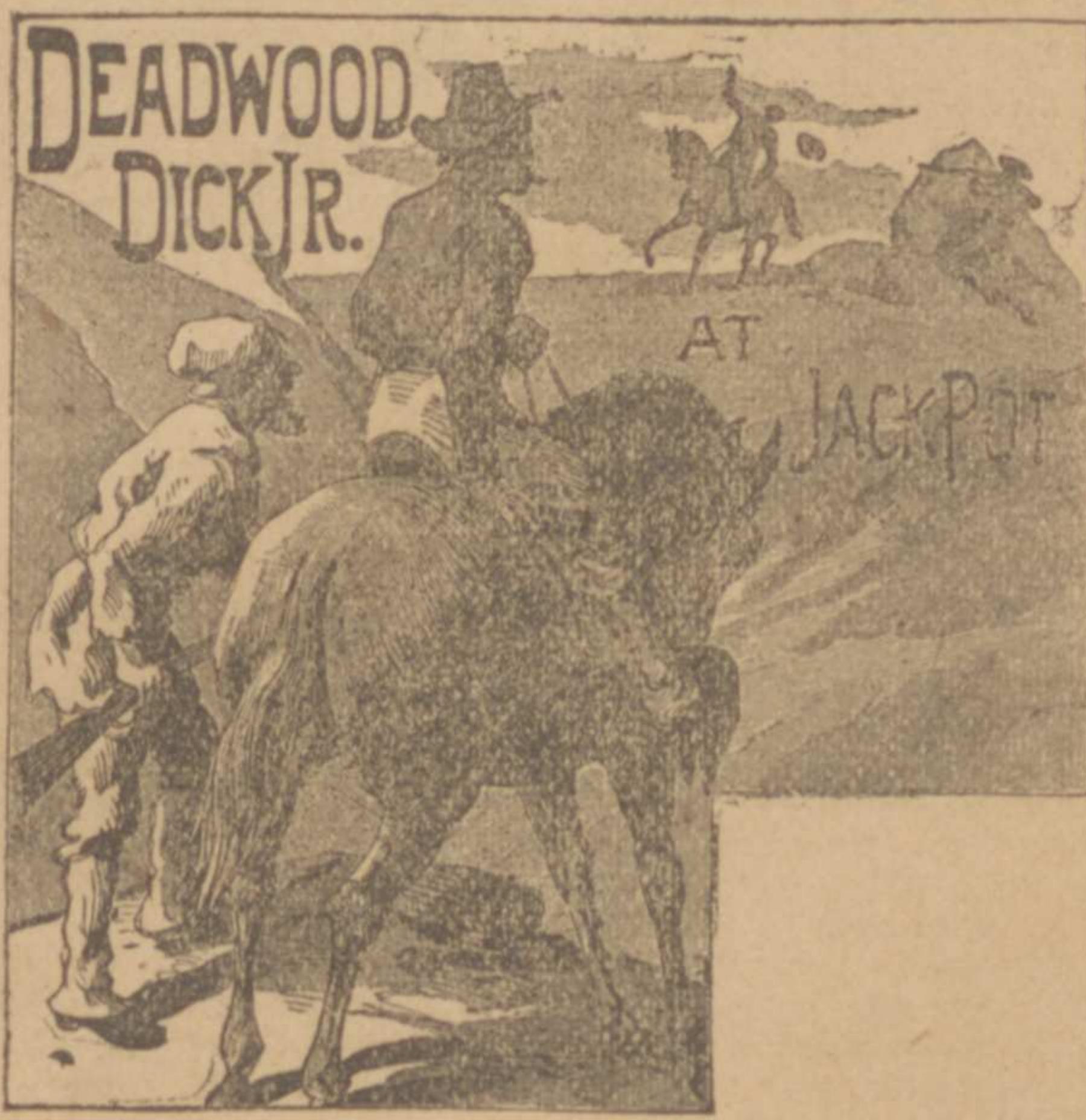
To abandon the idea of giving a few extracts from their lives causes infinite pain, but if once a start were made in that direction, it would be cruel to *The Evening Sun's* readers to stop, and it is therefore better not to relate one single adventure. Suffice it to say that the stories are clean and well written, and until the glut of gore and supernatural courage and success of the heroes becomes indigestible to the ordinary mind, there is much amusement to be found in adventures of the Deadwood Dicks.

The small boy and his larger brother have minds attuned by nature to absorb the music of the constant flow of villains' blood and the never-ceasing cracking of rifles and revolvers that keep the silence in a perpetual state of unrest throughout the Deadwood Dick series, but it is not so with a more mature mind, and unless you are a small boy or a youth prone to admire the terrifically heroic in literature, you are advised not to purchase the entire eighty volumes, but to try a sample here and there from the list. If you are a small boy, or the other fellow you doubtless know more about it than the writer, and so don't want any advice on the subject.

As a parting tribute to Mr. Wheeler, the owner of the brain that has evolved and continues to evolve the most popular boys' stories of the day, it is but fair to add, and an interesting fact as well, that he has also found time to dash off some novels about Cloven Hoof, the Buffalo Demon; Bob Woolf, the Girl Dead-Shot; Death-Face, Detective; Old Avalanche; Wild Edna, the Girl Brigand; Jim Bludsoe, Jr., the Boy Phoenix; Buckhorn Bill; Gold Rife, the Sharpshooter; Rosebud Rob; Nugget Ned; Idyl, the Girl Miner; Photograph Phil; Canada Chet; Watch-Eye; Jack Hoyle, the Young Speculator; Gilt-Edged Dick, the Sport Detective; Cinnamon Chip, the Girl Sport; Bonanza Bill; Boss Bob, the King of Bootblacks; Solid Sam, the Boy Red Agent; Captain Ferret, the New York Detective; New York Nell, the Boy-Girl Detective; Nobby Nick of Nevada; Wild Frank, the Buckskin Bravo; Fritz, the Bound Boy Detective; Snoczer, the Boy Sharp; Apollo Bill, the Trail Tornado; Cyclone Kit, the Young Gladiator; Sierra Sam, the Frontier Ferret; Jumbo Joe, the Boy Patrol; Denver Doll the Detective Queen; Turk, the Boy Ferret; A No. 1, the Dashing Toll-taker; Liza Jane, the Girl Miner; Kelly, Hickey & Co., the Detectives of Philadelphia; Little Quick Shot; Kangaroo Kit, the Mysterious Miner; Manhattan Mike, the Bowery Blood; First-class Fred; Yreka Jim, the Gold Gatheer; Nabob Ned; Cool Kit, the King of Kids; Bicycle Ben; Wrinkles, the Night Watch Detective; High Hat Harry, the Baseball Detective; Sam Slabsides, the Beggar Boy Detective; Jim Beat and Pal, Private Detectives; and Santa Fe Sal, the Slasher.

He may therefore be pronounced the Storyteller from Storytellersville, and the Deadwood Dick stories will be his towering monument.

Deadwood Dick Novels in Beadle's Half-Dime Library.

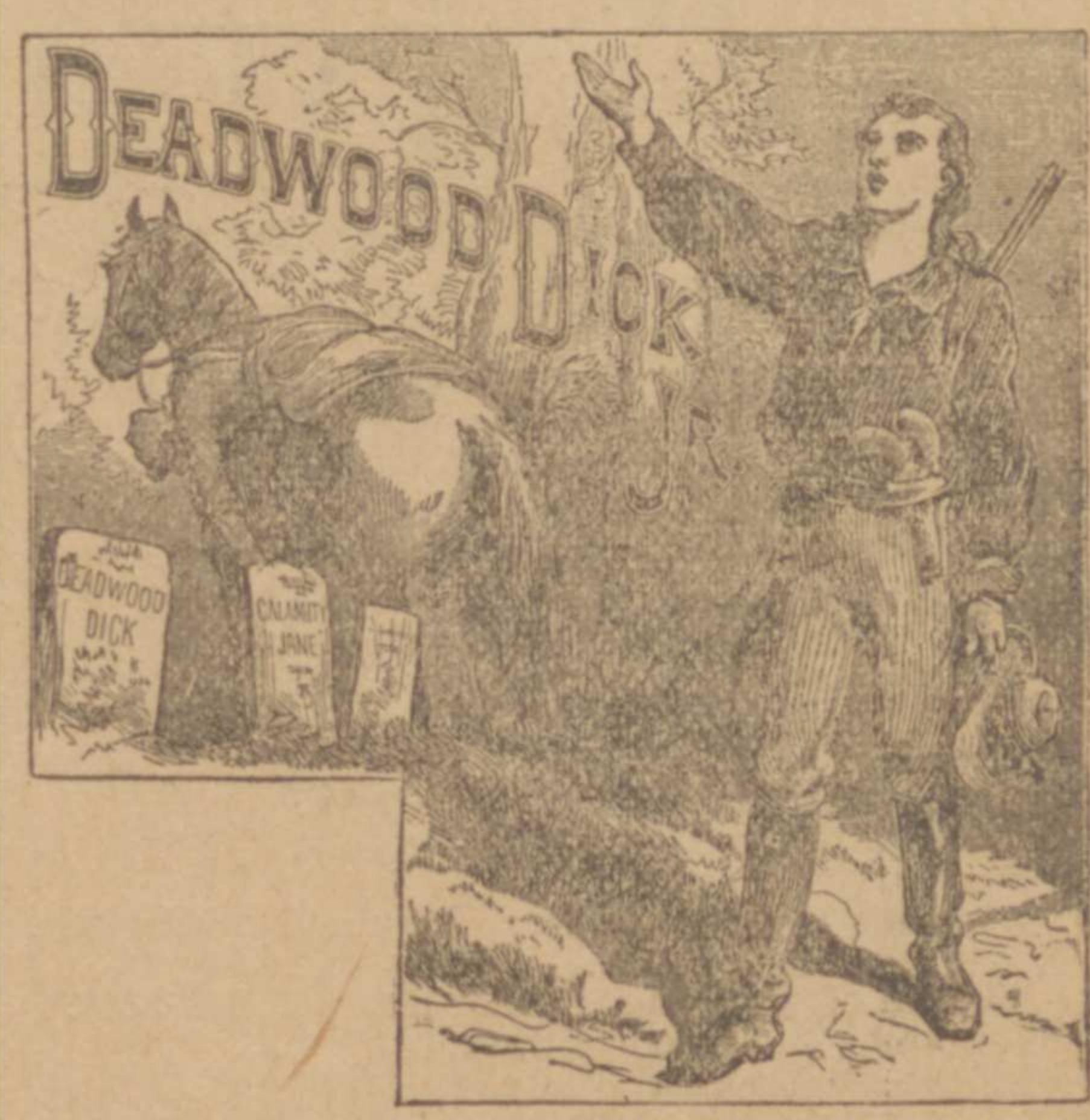


1 Deadwood Dick, the Prince of the Road.
 20 Deadwood Dick's Defiance; or, The Double Daggers.
 28 Deadwood Dick in Disguise; or, Buffalo Ben, the Prince of the Pistol.
 35 Deadwood Dick in his Castle; or, Wild Ivan, the Boy Claude Duval.
 42 Deadwood Dick's Bonanza.
 49 Deadwood Dick in Danger; or, Omaha Oll, the Masked Terror.
 57 Deadwood Dick's Eagles; or, The Pards of Flood Bar.
 73 Deadwood Dick on Deck; or, Calamity Jane, the Heroine of Whoop-up.
 77 Deadwood Dick's Last Act; or, Corduroy Charlie, the Boy Rover.
 100 Deadwood Dick in Leadville.
 104 Deadwood Dick's Device; or, The Sign of the Double Cross.
 109 Deadwood Dick as Detective.
 129 Deadwood Dick's Double.
 138 Deadwood Dick's Home Base; or, Blonde Bill.
 149 Deadwood Dick's Big Strike; or, A Game of Gold.
 156 Deadwood Dick of Deadwood.
 195 Deadwood Dick's Dream; or, The Rivals of the Road.
 201 Deadwood Dick's Ward; or, The Black Hills Jezebel.
 205 Deadwood Dick's Doom; or, Calamity Jane's Last Adventure.
 217 Deadwood Dick's Dead Deal; or, Captain Crack-Shot, the Girl Brigand.
 221 Deadwood Dick's Death Plant; or, Sugar-Coated Sam.
 232 Gold-Dust Dick; or, The Three Wild Men of Eagle Bar.
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 268 Deadwood Dick's Death Trail; or, From Ocean to Ocean.
 309 Deadwood Dick's Big Deal.
 321 Deadwood Dick's Dozen; or, The Fakir of Phantom Flats.
 347 Deadwood Dick's Ducats; or, Rainy Days in the Diggings.
 351 Deadwood Dick Sentenced; or, The Terrible Vendetta.
 362 Deadwood Dick's Claim; or, The Fairy Face of Faro Flats.
 405 Deadwood Dick in Dead City.
 410 Deadwood Dick's Diamonds; or, The Mystery of Joan Porter.



421 Deadwood Dick in New York.
 430 Deadwood Dick's Dust; or, The Chained Hand.
 443 Deadwood Dick, Jr.; or, The Sign of the Crimson Crescent.
 448 Deadwood Dick, Jr.'s, Defiance; or, Nickle-Plate Ned.
 453 Deadwood Dick, Jr.'s, Full Hand; or, Sunflower Sam of Shasta.
 459 Deadwood Dick, Jr.'s, Big Round-up; or, Flush Fan, the Ferret.
 465 Deadwood Dick, Jr.'s, Racket at Claim 10.
 471 Deadwood Dick, Jr.'s, Corral; or, Bozeman Bill of Big Brace.
 476 Deadwood Dick, Jr.'s, Dog Detective; or, Humboldt Harry, the Hurricane.
 481 Deadwood Dick, Jr., in Deadwood; or, Moll Mystery.
 491 Deadwood Dick, Jr.'s, Compact; or, Prince Pistol, the King of the West.
 496 Deadwood Dick, Jr.'s, Inheritance; or, Monte Cristo, Jr.
 500 Deadwood Dick, Jr.'s, Diggings; or, Doctor Death Grip's Swoop.
 508 Deadwood Dick, Jr.'s, Deliverance
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 612 Deadwood Dick, Jr., in Detroit; or, Turning the Tables on Satan.
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 654 Deadwood Dick, Jr., Among the Smugglers.
 660 Deadwood Dick, Jr.'s, Insurance Case.
 666 Deadwood Dick, Jr., Back in the Mines.



672 Deadwood Dick, Jr., in Durango; or, "Gathered In."
 678 Deadwood Dick, Jr.'s, Discovery.
 684 Deadwood Dick, Jr.'s, Dazzle; or, The Nemesis of Nutmeg Bonanza.
 690 Deadwood Dick, Jr.'s, Dollars; or, The Hummingbird of Honeysuckle.
 695 Deadwood Dick, Jr., at Danger Divide; or, Developing the Dead Secret.
 700 Deadwood Dick, Jr.'s, Drop; or, The Sojourn at Satan's Spring.
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